"Gold Boils in Jezebel"—STEUART EMERY

"A Colt for the Carlton", H. C. GAULT—"Eastbound Hotshot", KEITH EDGAR

Short Stories

ANC

August

25¢

Don't let murder become a habit!

"Deputy Cotter's Scrapbook"

by

MERLE CONSTINER

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WHAT A WAY TO START A VACATION!

THE GIRLS have got "thumbs down" on him already. They learned enough about him last night to make him an "also ran" today. Poor guy! The vacation that started out so swell is going to turn out so sour. And just because he was careless that one night!

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LAMONT BUCHANAN

August, 1949

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

EVERY AUTHOR'S FINEST AND LATEST STORIES

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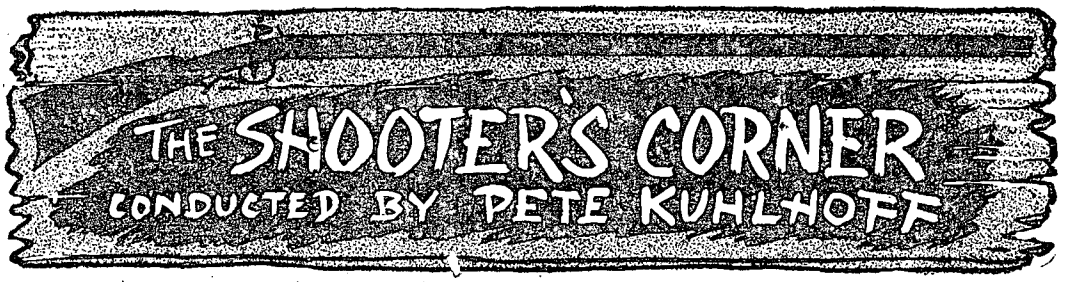

NEW ITEMS

Winchester

IT SEEMS like ages ago, but I guess it was at about the time the War ended, that I told you there was a new rifle a-cookin'! At that time I understood it was to be chambered for five different (not interchangeable) cartridges: the .22 Hornet, .218 Bee, .25-20, .32-20 and the .22 R-2 Lovell (a wildcat) but the R-2 never materialized. I also thought this new Winchester rifle was going to be a short action Model 70, and my disappointment was great when the finished product showed up. It's an entirely new job, nothing like the Model 70 (except that it is bolt action) which has long been a favorite of mine. I was hoping for a nice short action that could be used for some of the hotter wildcat cartridges.

Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with the Winchester Model 43. It was designed to sell for a comparatively low price, so production costs had to be kept at a minimum. It really is a good-looking rifle and sales will no doubt be great as the list price (May) for the Standard grade is only $54.95. The Special grade (with Lyman receiver sight and checkering) will relieve you of $73.25.

It seems to me that the .218 Bee is the best caliber for the average varmint-pest shooter, although the .22 Hornet would be a very close second.

The Model 43 is nicely stocked and not only looks quite similar to the .22 Rimfire Model 75 Sporter, but has the same feel, due to the weight and stock dimensions being about the same. I would prefer a little more weight, say around 7½ pounds instead of the scant 6.

The 100-yard accuracy (.218 Bee) is not bad, about three inches with open sights. Later I hope to rig a scope on one of these rifles in .22 Hornet caliber and give it the works. I'll let you know the results.

Savage

WHILE speaking of varmint rifles, let's take a look at the Savage Model 322, which is chambered for the .22 Hornet cartridge. It is a modification of the Model 325 carbine which came in .30-30 caliber.

The 322 sells for $42.95 and is a nice-looking little field gun, with accuracy about the same as that of the above Winchester 43.

To get the real accuracy story I'll have to mount a scope on one of 'em and burn four or five boxes of ammo.

Anyway, it looks as though the problem of getting a varmint rifle without going into hock for over a hundred bucks has been solved.

Optics

HAVE you ever purchased a camera, telescope, rifle scope sight or a pair of binoculars? The chances are that you have, or at least have contemplated such a move. Do you know just exactly what to look for in such an instrument so that it will adequately fulfill your requirements? In a quandry as far as optical information is concerned, have you tried to find a book on optics that you could read and easily understand? Of course, I don't know about you, but I've had all of these things happen to me!

Lately I have been studying a new book that would have saved me quite a tidy sum of dough had it been available in the past. It is "Basic Optics for the Sportsman" by Earle B. Brown, published by Stoeger Arms Corporation at $4. It is the first book on the

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subject that I have been able to understand without the aid of a sliderule and a ream or so of figurin' paper. It is divided into three parts. Principles of Optics, Optical Instruments and Care and Selection of Instruments, and believe me, the part covering the care and selection is well worth the price of admission for anyone who ever intends to buy a camera, telescope, binoculars or other optical instrument.

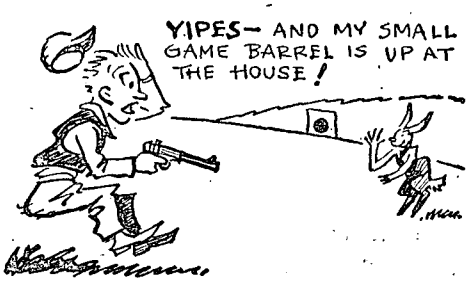
A wealth of interesting facts that ordinarily would be very difficult to unearth may be easily located by use of the very complete index. When I first got the book I was looking through the index and came to "Weathering of optical glass" page 222. Did you know that optical glass weathers? So help me, I discovered that moisture in the atmosphere will actually dissolve away microscopic amounts of the glass. And the effect of the corrosion is to produce a stain upon the glass surface which under the proper conditions is the equivalent of the coating we find purposely put on modern lenses to increase the light transmission. In other words, it is altogether possible for an optical instrument to improve with age.

Alex Stoeger has put in a lot of effort, to say nothing of the great expense to publish this book for the sportsman. It is an absolute must for anyone that may have occasion to use an optical instrument of any kind, and wants some practical information about that instrument. I, for one, hand him my vote of thanks.

Hi-Standard

THE boys up at the Hi-Standard pistol plant in New Haven, Conn., have figured out a new wrinkle. By the time this is in print they will have three new models in production and all former models will have been discontinued.

The three new .22 caliber pistols are known as the G-B, G-D, and G-E, and the new wrinkle is a quick and easy method of removing the barrel and slide. A latch just forward of the trigger guard is pressed and the barrel is drawn straight forward from the frame. Then the slide can be drawn off in the same way. This new design makes the guns very easy and somewhat faster to clean. But the most interesting feature is the possibility of having several instantly interchangeable barrels of different lengths and weights. Thus with one frame a shooter may have a short light-weight barrel for field use, and perhaps a couple of long heavy ones for use on the target shooting range. Naturally these extra barrels should be factory adjusted to the one particular frame for proper fit and functioning.



All three of the new guns are hammerless. Model G-B ($50) has the short grip similar to that of the early Hi-Standards or the old Model Colt Woodsman. This type of frame, due to its compactness is handier in the field and is preferred by many who use the guns for hunting and trapping. This model normally has the light-weight barrel available in two lengths—4½ inches and 6½ inches. Sights are fixed, that is, they are not readily adjustable.

Models G-D and G-E are target pistols built with the long handle and thick grips, and are similar except for barrel weight. The G-D has a medium-weight barrel, while the G-E has the heavy barrel. The barrel lengths are the same as for the light model. But as mentioned before, with the quick change idea, any weight or length of barrel can be used on any of the three frames.

The target guns are equipped with the new Hi-Standard, fully adjustable, click-type rear sight, and may be had with either plain or thumb-rest walnut grips. The guns have the usual fine Hi-Standard glossy blue finish, except on the front and back straps and the top of the slide, which have a non-slip, non-glare velvet matte finish.

Model G-D with plain grips is priced at $60, the thumb-rest grips add five bucks to the price. Model G-E with the thumb-rest grips is $68.

Don't get overheated in this nice hot weather!

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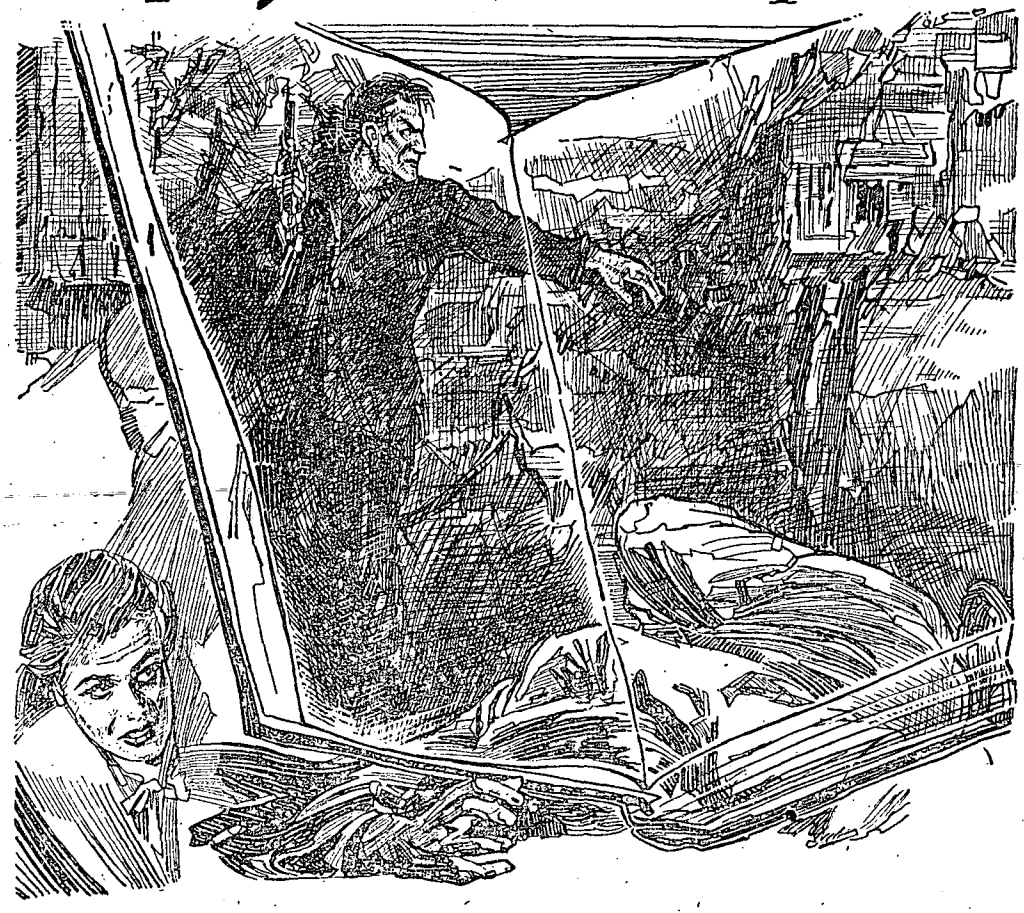
Deputy Cotter's Scrapbook



By MERLE CONSTINER

MRS. ILES was out at a neighbor's quilting, and I was in the kitchen fixing my supper of bacon and eggs, when I saw the note. I was tired and hungry, so I let it lay. I'd spent the afternoon at a hillman wedding on Birdsong Ridge over beyond the county seat, sporting my badge and gun, trying to act as peacemaker between a couple of cousins in a fenceline feud. It had been a waste of time, of course. The eyes of the men had simply coveted my pistol and their womenfolk had looked at my badge as though it were a rusty snuff bottle top. Then it was ten miles home through a January rain, hubcaps scraping red clay, and nothing in my stomach since breakfast but wedding cake and white Birdsong whiskey. That's being a deputy sheriff in an upland Tennessee county. I fixed the bacon like Mrs. Iles does, with a touch of rubbed sage, and after six eggs and some cornbread I felt better.

The note was propped up between the salt and pepper shakers at the back of the range. When I opened it, I almost collapsed.

It was from Mr. Preble.

He was asking me to help him commit another murder.

Help him again, I mean.

Deep in my heart I was convinced I'd helped him two times before. I didn't know how, but I was sure of the rest of it.

Dear Bridgman:

I wonder if you'd drop around to

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The Deputy Received a Letter; It Asked Him for Help in Committing Another Murder!

the office when you return. They've broken into the storage closet again and I'd like your professional opinion.

Sincerely,

F. F. Preble

Twice before that closet had been pried open. Nothing had been taken because nothing was kept in it. Each time I'd been summoned to check it over, and each time shortly thereafter someone had died under conditions satisfactory to the town, but disturbing to me.

Mr. Preble was the only person in the county that called me Bridgman. With everybody else it was either Whitey, or Bridge. Maybe by now Mr. Preble was feeling a paternal interest in me. After a moment's indecision I put my gun and badge in a dresser drawer with my socks and ties, slipped into a raincoat, and started for Main Street.

THE rain had gone into loose, wet snow, sticking to the boles of sidewalk trees and smothering the dim nightlights of Main Street's dingy shops and offices. These were old brick buildings, most of them, mouldy and damp, as ancient as the town itself. I was born and raised here and I loved it. At the very edge of town, hidden now by the blackness of night and snow, rose the wild wooded hills. It wasn't a large place but it was the trading center for the northeast corner of the county and a thrifty merchant who knew how to swap .30-30 shells for eggs and pelts could make a good living. When I was a youngster and kids my age in Nashville were buying penny candy and learning to respond to street lights, I was learning to respond to copperheads and digging Yankee minnie balls out of the shale along Wasp Creek.

Half of Main Street, and a third of the town, was owned by Old Man Sandcroft.

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Sandcroft's Store was two and a half stories, almost a block long, mouldy underneath and new-looking on the surface in brick veneer, and a sharecropper's paradise. They couldn't fill a doctor's prescription but if you were down from the hills and walked in and asked, you sure as hell would walk out with a new pair of red-stitched cowhide shoes or a ticket for a gimcrack wristwatch, to be "laid aside" until paid for at so much per month. Business always flourished at Sandcroft's.

Mr. Sandcroft was semi-retired. Mr. F. F. Preble was his partner and general manager.

It was a few minutes after eight. The nightlight was on and the corner door was unlocked. I walked down the cluttered aisle through the drygoods department, to the office at the rear. The office, back against the alley wall, sat out into the room like a box, red varnished and blank from floor to ceiling. The door opened and Mr. Preble pushed past me, into the salesroom. He said curtly, around a chew of tobacco, "Here at last, eh? Well, go in and sit down."

He was scrawny chested and bigheaded, with thin white hair over a rosy waxen skull; his eyes were constantly inflamed and constantly, too, he had a tiny tint of tobacco where his lip rolled at the corner. I never liked him and now I liked him a good deal less. He was in creased brown trousers and undershirt with his suspenders hanging about his hips. This was the night of the big double-western movie in the high school over at the county seat, and he never missed it.

I went into the office and sat down. Wet snow licked the grimy window.

A comfortable, broken-down swivel chair stood behind the desk. Its arms had been repaired with wire and it had a worn sponge rubber seat mat. That was where the second one had got it. That was where Hugh Weymouth's father had died.

The office was pleasant and old-timey with an oiled floor and massive woodwork brought over from the county seat years ago when the old courthouse had been rebuilt. The walls were plastered with old cartridge calendars. The big door that opened on the alley was sheathed in steel and two deeply recessed windows were barred with home-forged grilles. In the alley beyond, I knew, was a watering trough and a hillside hitching lot. The backdoors at Sandcroft's were as much used as its frontdoors. Hillfolks are shy and modest.

Mr. Preble came in with a salmon-and-white dress shirt from the drygoods department, took out the pins and tissue paper, and put it on. I asked, "Who found it this time? You or Mr. Sandcroft?" I knew the answer.

He donned a brown tweed coat with a weave that looked as though it had been baked on a waffle iron. "I found it," he said. Just like the other two times. "Mr. Sandcroft is at home, discussing a library endowment with Miss Leland."

Well, well, I thought. Now it's Miss Leland. And endowments.

MR. PREBLE picked up a faultless dove gray felt and walked with me into a back hall. A short, dirty passage that divided the Sandcroft store from the rest of the business block. Halfway down was a warped door with a shiny new lock. A pinch bar lay nearby and the lock had been wrenched from the doorframe. The closet was empty, of course. No one could remember when anything at all had ever been kept in it.

I said, "What about it? Shall I have them come out from the county seat and take fingerprints?"

Mr. Preble shook his head. "Nothing was taken. I just wanted you to check."

We left the store and stood under the arclight by Mr. Preble's car.

I was thinking about Old Man Sandcroft and Miss Leland. For a while now there had been a rumor floating around town that the old gentleman was skidding into his second childhood, and in the market again for a young wife. Miss Leland was a redhead, and tolerably young, and some folks considered her attractive.

Almost without realizing it, I said, "I wouldn't much like to see him do it again, not at his age. He deserves a rest."

Mr. Preble caught it perfectly. As though we'd been arguing about it. He, too, seemed to have his mind on Miss Leland and Mr. Sandcroft.

He said, "If he wants to marry again, that's his business. He's had a lot of trouble, and he may be lonely. He's a wonderful old

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man and nothing's too good for him." Under his breath, he added, "Bless him."

Bless him was right.

A year ago Mr. Preble was just a clerk and bookkeeper at Sandcroft's. Then Mr. Weymouth, the incumbent partner-manager, had had his accident, and died, and Mr. Preble had stepped up into his place.

Things had gone very well for Mr. Preble. He'd certainly prospered. Now, as he climbed into his car, gray hat, brown tweed, polished shoes, he said, "Goodnight, Bridgman."

I nodded.

The car pulled out and blinked through the snow around the corner. I thought of Mr. Preble driving nine hard miles, over hill roads, to see a double-western movie.

After a bit, I went back into the hall, dusted the door and pinch bar for fingerprints, and found nothing at all. Just like before. No soap.

Then I did something I'd been dreading for months. I started for Hugh Weymouth's Grain and Lumber Company.

I'd had a crush on Hugh when we'd been schoolyard kids together but as time went on she'd gotten older and wealthier and prettier and I'd gotten older and poorer and uglier, and we'd lost touch with each other.

Her father had put Sandcroft's on a paying basis and could buy a load of cotton by wiggling his finger. My old man took correspondence school lessons in fancy penmanship and argued the history of the American People and foxhounds on the bench in front of the postoffice. Mr. Weymouth died and left Hugh thirty thousand dollars. My old man left me thirty thousand friends, and a collection of twenty-nine corncob pipes.

WHEN Mr. Weymouth had had his accident, and his will had been probated, it turned out that he'd chosen Mr. Sandcroft as his executor. This had been a wise move. Old Man Sandcroft was meaner than a bobcat in a bag when money was involved and he'd collected every outstanding penny. They say the first thing he did after he promoted Preble, was to pressure him for an old personal debt to Weymouth. I don't doubt it. And I'll bet he collected, too.

The first thing Hugh Weymouth did, when the estate was settled and she got her thirty thousand, was to take the cash—and a list of acquaintances and customers that her father had accumulated working for Sandcroft—and start her own little lumber and grain business in competition to the almighty Sandcroft himself.

Preble went skyhigh, but Old Man Sandcroft thought it was funny.

I went south on Main Street, past the town hall and fire engine shed, and turned down Maple. The Weymouth Grain & Lumber was at the end of the street. I entered the big double wagon gates, crossed the yard through the shifting snow, and opened the door to the little concrete block office. It was my first visit.

The room was bare and well-swept. A new desk, a new filing cabinet, an oil stove, and a small glass showcase with a frugal display of doorknobs and hinges. Hugh Weymouth was at the desk, examining a sample of composition roofing. She was rawboned, and black haired, with soft hazel eyes. I can't explain it exactly, but somehow it seemed as though I was seeing her for the first time. The strain of this, and the strain of what I knew I was going to have to say was almost too much for me. The room was sluggish with the heat of the stove, and scented with a spicey personal perfume, and with the scent of the new pine floor. The snowflakes against the window seemed to blanket us in, to imprison us. And I had the silly idea that we were snowbound, together.

She said, "Deputy Cotter, this is a pleasure." Then she gave me a big smile and said, "How are you, Bridge?" Her voice was husky with friendship.

I said, "Hugh, I think your father was really murdered. I think I helped kill him."

She seemed not to hear. I slipped out of my raincoat and she took it from me and hung it over her own little fur collared coat, on a hanger behind the door. I pulled a chair up, away from the heat of the stove, and she leaned back in her desk chair. "What's this?" she said. And her face was as white as a sheet.

For ten minutes I tried to explain it, and saw that I didn't have anything to explain. She took me plenty seriously, though, and the more I stumbled, the more she tried to

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follow me. Finally, she said, "It's a horrible idea, Bridge. But I know you better than anybody in town. I know, for one thing, that you're the smartest man in town. And that, you'll admit, is not common knowledge."

"Those are the facts," I said. "I've got other stuff, but it's just theory. I've been worried sick over it."

"What is this other stuff, this theory?"

"I'll tell you later. But let's take a look at the facts again. A year ago Preble is a clerk at Sandcroft's. Say he wants to be manager. That's impossible for two reasons. Your father has that job. Even if your father were dead he'd never make the grade. Mrs. Sandcroft despises him—"

"I don't think she despised him," Hugh Weymouth corrected. "She was that way toward everybody. When her baby died five years ago it left her embittered."

"She despised Preble personally. I know. So Preble has two hurdles. Well, one day he comes around and tells me that a closet door has been jimmied, an empty closet. Two days later Mrs. Sandcroft dies. A month goes by. Again the empty closet is jimmied. Two days later your father has his accident."

"What does it mean? What's the connection?"

I tried not to show my anger. "I don't know! But it means something. Tonight he gave me the same business again. He's after someone else."

Twice she tried to speak. Finally, she said, "Who's next?"

"I don't know. I haven't the slightest idea. That's why I'm sweating blood."

"You've got to stop him, Bridge."

"I will, honey," I said softly. "If I have to bushwhack him coming home from one of those double-westerns."

Hugh's eyes were on mine with an intensity which embarrassed me. Then I realized she was using my forehead as a focal point to help her concentrate. "There was one thing about Alice Sandcroft I could never understand. When her baby died her whole nature changed. She seemed to hate everyone. Yet when she'd go away on her vacation she'd write us all letters. Friendly letters. Even to casual acquaintances."

That was true. I'd got one myself. From that cave resort up in Indiana where she spent her summers. Having wonderful time, wish you were here. At home she rarely spoke.

Hugh went to the filing cabinet and opened a folder at the back. "I brought a few things down from the house," she said. "It's more, well, convenient."

She'd padded her folders with just about everything to make them fat and impressive, old letters, nylons, circulars. I took an envelope from her hand and slipped out a letter. The rather garish letterhead announced boldly:

GREEN BLUFF CAVERNS
Swimming, Fishing Dancing, Resting
"Garden of the Gnome King"
Lodges, Cabins, Cottages
R. F. D. #1, Polton, Indiana
—WE PLEASE—

The letter itself said simply: *Dear Hugh. Would you mail me a bottle of Apex sunburn lotion from McGee's Drugstore? Having a marvelous rest. Wish you were here. Alice Sandcroft.*

I handed it back, and Hugh replaced it. As I put on my raincoat, I said, "I hear Old Man Sandcroft is neck deep in another romance."

Hugh Weymouth went up in the air. "If you mean me," she said furiously "— you're crazy. I've been out with him a few times, over to the county seat and so forth, but that was because he was executor for my father's estate."

I was astonished. "I didn't mean you," I said hastily. "I was thinking about Sally Leland. Preble said the old man was getting ready to endow the library. She's over there tonight. Preble thinks they may get hitched. If he wants to marry again, Preble says, that's his business. He's a wonderful old man and nothing's too good for him, bless him."

"Fowler Preble is a toady and a lick-spittle," Hugh Weymouth said. "Sally Leland is wormwood and gall to him."

I told her to keep the whole thing quiet and said I'd see her again, maybe tomorrow. I had a feeling she didn't want me to leave. She was looking stiff and scared when I finally took my leave and closed the door.

I thought about her all the way home.

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IF YOU'D take two loaves of bread and shove one up against the back of the other, at right angles, that would be the shape of Mrs. Iles' house. One storied, with a fancy spindled veranda running along both sides of the ell. In the crotch of the ell was a little wellhouse and drum, with the peculiar long slender well bucket they use in West Tennessee, and just south of it, along the kitchen siding was a stack of split heaterwood. The back leg of the house was mine, with its private entrance, and the front was devoted to Mrs. Iles, her sewing-circle friends, and her sporadic solitude. The spacious yard was filled with staghead oaks and now the well and the woodpile and the dark building were sheathed in shadow.

A blacker shadow, humped and crouching, disengaged itself from the woodpile and scooted around the corner of the kitchen as I approached. I yelled, "Hey!" in my deputy sheriff voice, and grinned. It was a sort of sport among the poor white woodstealers in town to pick on us.

I switched on the hall light, hung up my coat and hat on the golden oak hat tree, and went into my room. I have a pretty nice room.

Years ago it belonged to Mr. Iles and it remains just about as he left it that morning in 1910 when he'd donned his shoestring tie and panama and strolled down to the barbershop to watch a raging gun battle between five wild hillmen, and had caught a bit of the overflow. It had a bare floor with blue rag rugs, a big cherry bed and dresser, and a picture above the dresser of a woman in a plaster of paris nightgown with a butterfly on her wrist; it was entitled simply SPRING. I wondered if it was one of a set and how, back in 1910, she spent her other seasons.

Mrs. Iles had laid a fire for me in the fireplace. I started to light it, and then reached for my scrapbook.

The scrapbook had been Mrs. Iles' idea. Its covers were of pink fabrikoid. On a jelly label pasted to its front, Mrs. Iles had printed, *The Scrapbook of Deputy B. Cotter*. Item number one told how I caught a chicken thief. Item number two was a recipe for green tomato pie, followed by three sentimental sweet-singer poems, a joke about a little boy and a preacher, and a home formula for silver polish. Then I came up for a brief appearance, and again the household parade.

However, I found what I was looking for. Three times I read Alice Sandcroft's death, funeral, and obituary clippings. And the same for John Weymouth. I closed the book with a slap. Sheriff Collins was deeply grieved. But accidents will happen.

Sheriff Collins is an old-timer, and as good as they come, but when he issues a public statement to the *Clarion* you risk your badge to contradict him.

I was on my own and knew it—and felt pretty lonely.

I pulled my big leather chair up to the cold fireplace and thought about the locked door, Mr. Preble, and his victims. I couldn't figure in the door but I knew all the rest. I mean he'd actually killed Mr. Weymouth and Mrs. Sandcroft. Just how it had been done.

I knew it but I couldn't prove it. No one could prove it.

I'd been on hand both times.

THE first one, Mrs. Sandcroft, was back in November. It was about midnight and a wind was whipping the trees outside, when Mr. Preble had dropped in. It was late for a call and I had been mildly surprised. He chatted for awhile about that closet door (the first forced entry had occurred a couple of days before) and finally said he was troubled.

Old Man Sandcroft was out of town and it seemed as though Mr. Preble had an opportunity of throwing a nice deal his way. Sandcroft was down in Alabama buying lumber and a man named Pennyman, out by Scaleybark Schoolhouse, claimed to have better lumber cheaper. It would mean a lot of money for Sandcroft. Someone, maybe Preble, ought to send him a wire. Would I go around with him and ask Mrs. Sandcroft for the address?

"You work for him," I said. "You ought to know it."

"No one knows it, not even Weymouth," he declared. "When he's out on a buying trip he's very secretive. Only his wife knows."

"Why me?" I asked.

Well, it was late and Mrs. Sandcroft would be asleep. Furthermore it was town

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knowledge that she took sleeping medicine. Maybe we'd have to break in, go to her bedroom and wake her up. It was extremely important. He wanted a representative of the law on hand.

We got into the Sandcroft house through a cellar window, lighted lights on our way upstairs, and found Mrs. Sandcroft, like he said, in bed. I didn't much like it but I didn't know what to do.

Mr. Preble turned on the bedside lamp and shook her gently. She was plenty dopey. When she woke up and recognized him, she said, "Get out of this house, Fowler Preble." With plenty of hate.

He asked for Mr. Sandcroft's address and explained the Pennyman business. She continued muggy so he sent me into the bathroom for a glass of water. When I came back he said, "Okay, Bridgman. Thanks. I got it." She was asleep again.

I had a funny feeling, like I was being kidded. I was a little frightened, and mad, too, so I kept my mouth shut. He was halfway to the door when I noticed a silver spoon on the carpet, just under the bed by the bedstand, and whipped it into my pocket.

Next morning when Mrs. Sandcroft's maid came, she found Mrs. Sandcroft dead in her bed. Overdose of sleeping medicine, Doc Chalmers said.

I had to be mighty careful. I sent the spoon (it came from the church-supper cabinet at the Elm Street church) to a friend, a chemist, in Nashville to be analyzed.

The report came back negative. Nothing, not a trace of anything.

I WAS shaving one morning about a week after the funeral when the thing hit me like a flash of lightning. Of course the bowl of the spoon was clean, it hadn't been used. The handle had been used.

I remembered a trick our old family doctor had worked on me when I was a kid and had a tantrum and wouldn't take my cough syrup. He stuck a spoon in my mouth, handle first, and pressed it against the back of my gum. I opened up in a hurry.

Mrs. Sandcroft had died of an overdose of medicine, all right. When I'd left the room Preble had forced open her mouth, given her enough more to push her over the lethal stage, and no autopsy in the world could convict him.

He'd stolen the spoon and brought it with him. That was premeditation if I ever heard of it.

Later I checked on Pennyman. He had lumber to sell, as Preble had said, but his price was way out of line with the Alabama market.

That was Alice Sandcroft.

ONE night John Weymouth and Fowler Preble had been working late, taking inventory. Out in front, in the drygoods department. Preble thought he heard someone tampering with the office door in the alley. Weymouth went to the office, gave me a ring, and stepped out into the alley for a look-see. Hal Lafferty's empty poultry truck broke loose from the hillside hitchinglot just above him, came out of the night like an avalanche, and crushed him against the brick wall. I got there just as Preble was carrying him with some difficulty into the office where he died.

Hal Lafferty was around at the ice cream parlor with his wife and kids. Folks said it was just one of those things.

That was John Weymouth.

The next time I saw Mr. Preble he was Mr. Sandcroft's new partner-manager.

I was sitting in the chilly room thinking how fine and honest Mr. Weymouth had been, and how dainty and delicate Alice Sandcroft had been (even if she had been a little on the unfriendly side) when I found myself somehow annoyed.

At first I couldn't put my finger on what was bothering me, and then I realized.

The only real change in the room since Mr. Iles' day was the fireplace. Mr. Iles had had it bricked up, and a stove put in. When I took over, I had the stove removed and the old fireplace reopened. One relic of Mr. Iles' stove, however, remained. In the chimney a foot or so below the ceiling, where the stovepipe had once gone, was now a circular metal shield, fluted at the edges and decorated with picture of a black and white sow standing in a green meadow. In someway, during the years, the disc had worked around slightly, so that the cow appeared to be standing on its forelegs, its backlegs elevated.

Tonight, now, it was on a perfectly even

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keel. Someone had meticulously straightened it.

I pulled up a chair and removed the shield from the chimney. Just inside a bit of binder-twine had been anchored in a cleft in the bricks. I tested it, and saw that it was weighted, within the throat of the chimney. Carefully, I reeled it in. A moment later I had a curious contraption before me, under the student lamp, on the table.

Maybe curious is the wrong word. At the end of the string, gauged to hang almost down to the fireplace opening, was a bundle of six sticks of dynamite, each with its detonation cap, lashed around a milk bottle. The milk bottle was full of gasoline and loosely stoppered with a gasoline-wet roll of cotton batting.

I realized then something else that had surprised me. Mrs. Iles never laid my fires for me.

The shadow I'd passed on my way in, by the woodpile, hadn't been a pilferer. It had been a murderer.

For months, ever since I'd first become suspicious, I'd been careful to keep my thought to myself. I wondered how, tonight, I'd given myself away.

I began to wonder if Fowler Preble was really smarter than I was. He'd been smarter than Mrs. Sandcroft, and smarter than John Weymouth.

Though it was after ten, I thought perhaps I'd better rush things a little and have a talk with Mr. Sandcroft. I hoped Miss Leland wouldn't mind.

FROM the wall phone in the hall I called Harry Jackson. Harry lived next door to Old Man Sandcroft. I said, "Harry, this is Whitey. I want you to do me a favor." I looked at my wristwatch. "In exactly fifteen minutes, go out to your henhouse and give it four or five good hefty kicks. That's right. And then go back to bed. Thanks." He began asking questions, so I hung up. My five cell coonhunting flashlight was on the hat-tree; it looked official, so I took it along.

The Sandcroft house was out beyond the cotton compress. It was about the oldest house in town, with bloated bay windows, a battered roof, and a yard full of grapevine hung trees and untamed holly bushes. Only one light showed, the light in the library window. Though Mr. Sandcroft were entertaining an honored guest he remembered the days of kerosene and husbanded his electricity. I mounted the ten wooden steps to the high front veranda and rang the bell. About three minutes later the door opened. It opened just a crack, as though Mr. Sandcroft were letting the cat out.

I was tempted to waver my voice and say angrily, "I am Sally Leland's pappy, suh. Do you realize it's seventeen minutes after ten?" But Sally Leland's pappy was up in Iowa.

The porchlight came on and Mr. Sandcroft said, "Oh, it's you, Whitey." He started to close the door. "I'm about to retire."

I looked shocked.

Flustered, he said, "I have a guest who is on the verge of leaving. When my guest departs, I mean, I intend to—"

I tapped my oversized flashlight, raised my eyebrows mysteriously, and stepped past him into the hall. He was a little man, scrawny, no one knew just how old, and as tough as white leather. Besides his town property he owned a half dozen farms and his tight little cheeks were sun-reddened from walking fencelines and laying off drains. He wore crescent lensed spectacles and affected a country-style haircut. He had no sense of humor at all and I knew if I didn't put this over I'd be receiving a regretful letter from Sheriff Collins.

Without a word I walked up the panelled stairs, to the upper hall. He followed me up and into the late Mrs. Sandcroft's dark bedroom.

All at once, next door, Harry Jackson began attacking his henhouse. Chickens squawked, and then the blows stopped and there was silence. "Chicken thieves," Mr. Sandcroft said with interest. "Sounds like they're taking the building too. Shouldn't you be, well, over there?"

I took a position by the window. "Trap," I said shortly. "Catch 'em later, redhanded."

He said, "Oh," and left the room.

Alone, I closed the door, hooded my flash with my hand, and checked on a half-memory.

Blue floor beyond the buff carpet, honey colored furniture, little blue bedlamp of

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hobnailed glass on the bedstand. Just like the night Mr. Preble had poisoned her. Then there had been an eiderdown quilt on the bed, now there was a ruffled bedspread. A fragile and delicate room, and a little cold, just as Alice Sandcroft had been fragile and delicate and a little cold. I turned my beam on the closet door.

My half-memory had been right. Mrs. Sandcroft's bedroom closet had an expensive tumbler lock, one of the newest Hacklett jobs.

The key was in the lock now and I swung the door open. Her clothes, if that was what she had kept there, had been taken away. The closet, fancy and cedar lined, was empty but for a hatbox on the floor in the corner. I looked inside. Just a handful of short silken cords. White silk cords about four or five inches long, about a hundred of them. I put one in my pocket, replaced things as I'd found them, and went downstairs to the library.

Sally Leland was just coming through the library door, on Old Man Sandcroft's arm. They joined me in the lower hall by the newelpost. Miss Leland had been in town for three years now, and in that time I'd never got to know her very well. She was maybe thirty-six, carrot topped and cute, and put out a lot of fuss and feathers about being a simple smalltown girl. Tonight she was wearing a trim little suit of fuzzy green wool. I like colors, it was a nice green, so I said so. I said, "Howdy, Miss Leland. That's a nice green."

She was busy swooning at Old Man Sandcroft and ignored me. Sandcroft asked, "Did you make any headway, Whitey? I mean upstairs?"

I nodded. "Yes, I did. Incidently, why the expensive lock on Mrs. Sandcroft's bedroom closet? What did she store in it, furs?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I often used to wonder. When I opened it after her death it was empty. She never allowed anyone inside. She slept with the key under her pillow. She had the lock put on herself."

One locked closet led to another and I asked him if he'd heard about the damage down at the store.

"Yes," he said. He was a string-saver, and a pin-saver, and a jimmied door outraged his sense of property. His face purpled. "Yes, I heard. Fowler phoned me from Big A and told me about it."

Big A was a crossroads halfway to the county seat. They didn't show double-westerns at Big A. I said, "I thought he went over to the county seat?"

"He was headed that way and had car trouble. That's actually why he called me. He's got a very methodical mind and always keeps me posted on his personal affairs. Says he belongs body and soul, now, to Sandcroft's Store."

He beamed and I tried to beam back. I didn't ask him about any dynamite. The dynamite, I knew, was stump blasting dynamite for clearing new ground, and had come from the explosives shed out beyond the creek, owned by Sandcroft and Company. A good screwdriver could get you inside.

Miss Leland was jingling her car keys. "If you're ready, Bridge," she said, "I'll drive you home."

The drive home was short and silent. The snow had melted again to rain, rain and mist. Main Street was desolate. We turned down Poplar, the headlights cut Mrs. Iles' horsehead hitchingpost out of the night, and Miss Leland stopped at the curb. As I climbed out, she said coldly, "So you think my suit is too young for me. You think I dress in poor taste."

For a minute I was dazed. Then I said, politely, "You're too young for *it*. I think it's beautiful. I mean—"

"I see. It's just that you don't like green."

"I like green. Very much. I said so. I said it was a nice green."

Her voice trembled. "And smiled when you said it. A crooked, sarcastic smile." Suddenly, in the dashlight, she looked as though she were crying. "Just stood there and smiled and sneered!"

I hadn't smiled and I knew it. I said humbly, "If I smiled it was a facial accident. I have a very nervous constitution. I'm sorry. You'll have to excuse me."

Bingo. She was all joy and warmth and forgiveness. "Goodnight, Bridge," she said.

I tipped my hat and started up the walk. I didn't wait.

MRS. ILES was home from her quilting. There was a man-sized chicken sandwich and a thermos of coffee waiting for me

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in my room. I took off my shoes, punched up the fire, and as I ate I thought of Old Man Sandcroft. When Alice Sandcroft's baby had died, it must have been hard on Sandcroft too. He'd lost a son and heir. But no one ever thought of that. Mrs. Sandcroft had got all the sympathy. Sandcroft had just gone around with a poker face, no one ever gave him a second thought.

I got to thinking about Mrs. Sandcroft's letter to Hugh Weymouth asking for sunburn lotion. They certainly sold sunburn lotion at a big resort like Green Bluff Caverns. Then I got to wondering about Green Bluff Caverns. I went into the parlor, took the atlas out of Mrs. Iles' golden oak bookcase, and opened it on the horsehair sofa.

Polton, Indiana, was down in the south, along the Ohio River. In Trumbo County.

I went out into the hall, got to work on the phone, and after a bit got through to the sheriff of Trumbo County. He was out in the barn, his wife said, doctoring a sick horse. She called him in.

I introduced myself, and said, "Do they sell sunburn lotion at Green Bluff Caverns?"

I had to shout this three times. He thought I was crazy. Finally, we got straightened out.

"No, son," he said. "They don't sell no kind of lotion at Green Bluff Caverns. It's just a hole in the ground, the cave, and a little tumbledown shanty store. They ain't no resort there, and never has been—during my life. It's jest a wild and woolly overgrowed hog wallow. What did you say this lady's name was?"

Alice Sandcroft, Mrs. Garfield Sandcroft. I spelled it for him.

"I never heard of her," he said. And hung up.

MRS. ILES joined me at breakfast, sat across from me, and simply handed me things. Peach fritters, thick smokehouse bacon, cornpones and sorghum. She could turn her conversation on or off at will, and the late Mr. Iles had requested silence and reverence over food. Outside, beyond the trumpetvines of the porch, the rain fell from a sodden sky, silvery and ceaselessly, like bright new knitting needles. When I'd finished, I kissed her on the top of the head, got my hat and raincoat, and went to the barn for my car.

Runnels of foamy water flushed from the red clay alleymouths of Main Street. Through the streaked windows of Sandcroft's I could see Mr. Preble and Mr. Sandcroft on hickory chairs in the hardware department. Mr. Preble was leaning forward, almost on his knees, relighting Mr. Sandcroft's cigar-stump. I parked, entered the passageway, and found Toothy Owens, locksmith from the county seat, with tools and keys all over the floor repairing the smashed door-lock. Toothy had secret aspirations of being a deputy sheriff. He greeted me frostily. I watched him for a while, and left.

I wondered then what I'd wondered twice before. Why, when Sandcroft's sold locks, did they have to bring an expert over from the county seat to repair an old one? Why not just put in a new one? At half the time and expense. A local carpenter could handle it.

I drove past the bank, past town hall, turned down Maple and drove into the yard

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of the Weymouth Grain & Lumber. Hugh was in her little cubbyhole office, listening to the rustle of rain against the low roof. She was wearing a coral frock which brought out the blackness of her hair and a good night's rest seemed to have wiped the shock from her mind. She welcomed me eagerly and I brought her up to date on developments.

When I told her about the dynamite in my chimney she said, "Then it was you, Bridge! You were the one he was planning on this time. He's afraid of you."

"I'm just a side issue with him," I said. "He's always favored bigger game than me."

When I handed her the silken cord, and gave her the story about finding it in Alice Sandcroft's closet, she shook her head. "I've seen something like it some place," she said. "But I can't place it. It's too much for me."

"Keep it," I said. "It may come back to you."

Somehow I drifted into the business of Miss Leland driving me home. "That must have been fun," Hugh said.

"I'm on a case," I explained.

She sat there grinning at me like a mule eating briars. For a moment I hated her.

"Did you find yourself suddenly apologizing for nothing?" she asked. "Did you hurt her feelings? That's a favorite gambit of hers—and a quick ice-breaker, they tell me."

I said stiffly, "I don't remember."

"I bet you don't."

"I had my mind on other things."

"I bet you did."

There was no friendliness in her eyes, only fury. I was mad enough to chew nails myself, but managed to hide it. Outside in my car the wheels spun in the greasy red clay a good four minutes before I could get going. That didn't help things. I could visualize her inside at her desk, having a big laugh.

JUST after lunch the phone rang. It was my old friend, the horse-doctoring sheriff of Trumbo County, Indiana, and in a dry, asthmatic way he seemed excited.

"Well, son," he said, "I solved your case for you."

I thanked him, and waited.

He said, "I drove out to Green Bluff Caverns and talked to the Higgenses. The folks that run that little shanty-store. They're a mighty old family, son. The Higgenses. Paw-paw raised, ingrowed, and strictly antisociable. However, I prevailed on 'em."

"Fine," I said. I thought he was just giving himself a free ride.

"Yes, sir. I prevailed on 'em. They knew this Mrs. Sandcroft, all right. Some years ago—they ain't too smart about time—she drove up, drank a bottle of cherry pop, and made them a proposition. A fast talking little woman she was, with a face like a chipmunk but pretty, a little scar on her right-hand thumb, and about five foot two, or two and a quarter."

"That's her!" I froze. "They must have known her well."

"No. They just saw her once, but about people the Higgenses is smart. There was a deal and she paid them well for it. During summers they was to act as a remailing service for her. She'd send 'em letters in packets and they'd remail them. Does that fix you up?"

It left me reeling. I got organized, said, "What about the other letters. The ones that came in for her? What became of them?"

"They were put into bigger envelopes and forwarded, son."

"To where? What was her forwarding address?"

"They weren't forwarded to her, son. They were sent to Mr. John Weymouth, Planters and Merchants Hotel, right there in your town."

"Right back here!"

"Yep. Right back there."

After a moment, I said, "Sheriff, did you ever hunt wild boar?"

"No, son," he said. "But I'd sure like to."

I said, "We've got wild boar over in East Tennessee and I've got an uncle there that knows how to find them. Next year he'll be expecting you. Bring along a friend if you like."

I could almost feel him tremble with excitement. "Thank you kindly, Deputy Cotter. I'll bring my brother-in-law. He ain't a friend but he's got the guns."

Mrs. Iles was having herself a big bath—I could hear the threshing and joyous blowing through the pine-and-groove door—getting ready for a missionary tea. I left a brief note saying I was driving to the county seat, got in my car and headed for the library.

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MR. PREBLE himself was just returning from lunch when I passed Sandcroft's. I pulled in to the curb, opened the door, and he scrambled on to the seat beside me, out of the drizzle. He looked well-fed, and happy, and I wondered if there was anything in mental telepathy, and if he could possibly be knowing what I was thinking. Because I was thinking it mighty hard. I asked, "How did you like the western last night?"

He pulled down the corners of his tobacco-stained lips. "I had a breakdown at Big A, turned around and came home. I pulled in clanking like a boiler factory about midnight, I guess."

He was wondering what was on my mind and I figured the best way to give it its full effect was to delay it. After a long silence, I said, "Consider this confidential?"

He nodded.

I said, "Just who is Mr. Sandcroft planning to marry? Hugh Weymouth or Sally Leland?"

He gaped. "Hugh Weymouth?"

"I hear she's been going around with him now and then. Over to the county seat and so on."

He looked flabbergasted. "I didn't know," he said. "I hadn't heard." Suddenly, he asked slyly, "You in love with Hugh?"

I held my breath to redden my face, and said, "Yes." And then I began to feel uneasy, to wonder if I really could be at that.

He said, "I don't understand Hugh. I don't mean to low-rate the child but take the Weymouth Grain & Lumber Company. Set right up in our faces with a list of her father's customer-contacts formed by him at Sandcrofts!"

"Unethical, eh?"

"Unethical? It's practically illegal. Almost, but not quite." He tapped me on the knee. "Do you know what happens when you sell a store, for instance, or a company like a lumber company? Well, you sell the stock on hand, and the good will. The good will. That means the customers. The contract generally stipulates specifically that you will agree not to open a similar business in that community for a stipulated number of years. It's the good will that makes success or failure."

"I see," I said. "But Hugh didn't buy it. She inherited it."

Veins stood out on his temple. "How could she inherit an intangible like good will—which didn't belong to her father in the first place, but to Sandcroft's Store! She didn't inherit, she filched it."

I could hardly wait to tell her that Mr. Preble said she'd filched her business. She'd go up like tinder.

"I'm old enough to be your father, Bridgman," Mr. Preble said unctuously. "And I have your welfare at heart. Put Hugh Weymouth out of your mind. She's, ahem—unworthy."

He climbed out. "And if any other problem arises, feel free to call on me." He tried to look tender and I thought of the snapping turtles that hid back under old tree roots out on Wasp Creek.

I said, "Thank you, sir," and rolled away.

OUR village library is a little yellow brick building with a tin roof, on Church Street, just back of the postoffice. Just inside the door-window a yellow blind had been lowered and a placard said: *Closed Thursday at 12:00*. The day had slipped my mind. I had a question to ask Miss Leland, but it wasn't important enough to look her up at home and break into her afternoon off. The next stop on my schedule was the Planters and Merchants Hotel.

About every town in the South at one time or another has had a Planters and Merchants Hotel. We had ours back in the '80s, it failed about the turn of the century, and was still with us. Over the bridge, beyond the creek in the old end of town, it was now run by a local wouldbe badman named Timberlake. Occasionally it caught a tourist, or a down-and-out carnival troupe, but mostly it stayed empty. It was a gambling dive and way-station for citybound hill whiskey and had a bad rep for Saturday night cuttings and shootings. I'd been waiting for a long time to catch Timberlake off base, and he knew it. There was no love lost between us.

It didn't look too bad from the street. A big squarish wooden building with a pyramid roof, it sat in a nest of brush and saplings that rose almost to its second story window sills. Every couple of years Timberlake gave its front a coat of green paint, to keep the town council off his neck. Its sides, however, were rotted and warped and at the rear its upper windows were actually boarded

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with scrap lumber. I parked my car, pushed through the tangle of leafless shrubs along the circling brick walk, and came up to the back porch. The back porch had once been screened and now the rusty mesh fluttered and swayed in the January wind. Beyond the backyard, waist-high with dead pipestem weeds, was a decrepit barn, and beyond the barn, an alley. Nowadays most of the Planters and Merchants clientele entered the edifice by this imposing route. That was the way John Weymouth had come, in the dark of night perhaps, asking for Mrs. Sandcroft's mail. I opened the sagging screen-door, crossed the porch, and entered the old hotel kitchen.

The windows were heavily shuttered, for Timberlake was a muskrat who despised daylight. A lamp burned on a butchers' block in the corner. The grand, high ceilings were dusty and cobwebbed, the tiers of kitchen cupboards shadowy and indistinct. Timberlake stood at the old zinc-lined sink, washing beer bottles at the little cast-iron pump. You don't wash beer bottles to return them; you might wash them if you were going to reuse them for something, say illicit whiskey. He was a big man with a thimble-shaped head and a thicklipped mouth that ran across his face from earlobe to earlobe. His head and arms were covered with a reddish down. The room was cold. He wore calf-length boots and overalls, a dirty shirt and a greasy pinstripe coat. The tails of the coat were jammed down into the overalls for warmth; outside the rain pelted the shutters like birdshot.

When he saw me, and recognized me, he set a beer bottle down with delicate animal precision and slipped his hands into his hip pockets. I knew him as a knife-fighter, I knew that was where he kept his barlowe. He said, "Deputy Cotter." And then he chuckled. "By doggies, it looks like I've got you alone."

I've never liked Timberlake's kind. And Timberlake had always seemed the worst of them all. A red rage numbed out my mind, but I kept a poker face. I said, "You can turn that two ways."

He frowned.

I said, "Put it this way. At last I've got you alone. Let's see that ten-cent barlowe."

I must have been white around the gills because sweat popped out on his forehead.

It took him a good two minutes to get his breath. He brought his hands in the open, empty, and said hoarsely, " 'Scuse me, Whitey. I've always been a prankster. How about a nice sandwich and a soft drink?"

I didn't bother to shake my head. I said, "I'm going to ask you a few questions. If you want to lie to me, that's your business. You've been dragged into a 110-proof set-up, and the more you lie the worse it's going to be for you later on."

I TOOK the short silk cord from my pocket and held it up to the lamp. "Know what this is? Ever see it before?"

He was genuinely bewildered. I sighed and stowed it away.

"During certain summers," I said, "Mr. John Weymouth got certain mail here, through you. What do you know about it?"

"I know all about it, everything." Timberlake showed no reluctance in discussing it. "They come from up in Indiana, but that was just a fooler. The big envelope was addressed to Mr. Weymouth, the other one inside was addressed to Mrs. Sandcroft up at a place called Green Bluff Caves. These inside letters mostly come from folks right here in town and was full of little stuff about how hot it was, and like that. Only one letter really said anything."

"Weren't these letters sealed?"

"I run a straight, honest place here, I got responsibility. I steamed 'em. This one letter I mentioned was a shocker, it unsettled my faith in my fellow man, you might say. It was from Old Man Sandcroft telling his wife that he suspicioned John Weymouth was embezzling from him. When I handed this letter over to Mr. Weymouth I was ashamed to meet his eye. I was gettin' to like him."

John Weymouth's books were short. But who kept John Weymouth's books? Fowler Preble.

I said, "So you gave this mail to Mr. Weymouth, and he sent it to Mrs. Sandcroft?"

"Sent it, maybe. Maybe jest handed it to her."

I waited.

Timberlake said, "Maybe Mrs. Sandcroft was all the time right here in town, or nearby."

"Mr. Weymouth wasn't staying here at the hotel?"

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"No. All the time he was living with Miss Hugh, in their little cottage out on Wasp Creek Road."

I hated to ask this question, but I had to do it. "Was Mrs. Sandcroft staying here?"

Timberlake was aghast. "In this dump? Heck no!"

IT TOOK me an hour and forty minutes to make the nine mile drive into the county seat. I stopped at Big A for a second and verified Preble's statement that he'd telephoned Sandcroft from there. The folks that ran the Big A store said that he'd complained about car trouble. Just as I pulled away from Big A the rain started with a woosh and a roar. The pole bridge was out over Halfway Branch and I had to detour over Three Sister Ridge, down through the hollow back of Killdeer Chapel, and cross the stream in Verne Lamar's mule lot. Verne liked to pour concrete and he had himself a beautiful little bridge in his very backyard. When I slewed up and parked in front of the courthouse the rain had let up but my car looked like it had been salvaged from a sinkhole.

Our county seat is a town of about three thousand. All about it the hills form a sawtooth horizon but its citizens ignore them and refer to their community as "rich bottomland." It's pleasant enough in the summer, with its tree-arched streets and syringa, but in midwinter its cheap shops and office-fronts have the pale blue and pink shabbiness of a penny postcard. Its courthouse was big enough for three counties with the population of ours. Now, its green park benches were decked against the wall behind the big white pillars, out of the weather.

I pushed open the big glass panelled doors, walked down the linoleumed hall, and entered Sheriff Collins' office.

Sheriff Collins, grizzled and lantern-jawed, was behind his desk with his baby grandson on his knee, pretending to load a plastic pistol with 32-20s from his gunbelt. All the time the kid was clawing like mad for the sheriff's Smith and Wesson. This scrambling and wrestling went on all the time I talked to him. I told him everything, theory, speculation, and fact. When I finished, he said proudly, "Watch him, Bridge. He's been working like a little beaver for two hours. He's got his little mind set on blowing my head off!"

I said, "What shall I do about it?"

He said, "Did which?"

"Shall I go right ahead?"

"Go right ahead," he said sternly. He hadn't the slightest idea what I'd been talking about.

I left the courthouse, went down courthouse alley to Pike Street, and climbed narrow stairs to the second floor of a dingy office building. A wooden sign said *Clarion* Office. The *Clarion* was our county weekly and handled most of the county job printing.

I twisted the big china doorknob and entered a small room containing a rolltop desk, a little wooden railing, and a wall of old wooden filing cases. A chunky little man with intelligent eyes was rejuvenating his typewriter ribbon with a drop of machine oil. Charlie Setter had been a friend of my father's, and was about the only real friend I had in this whole wide world. For that matter, a man like Charlie Setter only pops up once in a century. Without looking up he said, "You boys from the sheriff's office quit pestering me. Always hanging around the presses, asking for cotton waste to polish your badges!"

I said, "Hi, Charlie," and he took out his conversation-spectacles and put them on. Again I went through the whole thing, just as I'd told the sheriff.

WHEN he heard about the dynamite his face got so angry-red I thought it would burst into flame.

Finally he said, "There's an extra bedroom in that shack of mine which should just about fit you, Bridge. Move into civilization. No thornbush barricades around the house at night to keep off man-eating animals, just peace and quiet."

"You people here in the countyseat pretend this is the Garden of Eden," I said. "When, for the record, did you last hear a pistolshot?"

"Yesterday, as I recall. From the Pastime Poolroom across the street. But a very small pistol, they tell me, and entirely in the spirit of fun."

He went to a filingcase and laid a manila sample-envelope before me. The sort job printers use to file specimens. It contained a printed envelope and a sheet of letterheaded paper. *Green Bluff Caverns; Swim-*

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ming, Fishing . . . Lodges, Cabins, Cottages . . . I'd seen it all before.

"She came in five years ago," Charlie Sandcroft said dryly. "And ordered five hundred of each. She said she was having them made up for a friend up in Indiana, that I did better work and cheaper."

I thanked him. As I was about to leave, he said, "Perhaps I'd better just phone this Fowler Preble, disguise my voice, and warn him that if anything happens to you I'll burn his cowbarn."

"He doesn't have a cowbarn."

"Drat it," he said. "Why doesn't he? The Setters have always avenged themselves by burning cowbarns!"

I told him not to mess around, that he could do me more hurt than help.

He said affably, "If you say so. However, if anything happens to you I'll give that gentleman my full attention."

THERE was a big rosy smile on his face but there was a look in his eyes I'd never seen there before. Mean, and cold, and slatey. He was half hillman himself. "I liked your pappy mighty well," he said mildly.

My next call was at Toothy Owens' locksmith shop.

The place had about seven feet of frontage, between the Magnolia Quick Lunch and the Dixie Auto Parts, on a backstreet. I opened the door, wedged my way along a small counter past a partition, and came out into the back workroom.

Toothy was working at a bench, over a vise, with a warding file. All around him were the tools of his trade and up on the wall was a pigeonhole cupboard, like the mail rack in a small hotel, for jobs finished and to be called for. He said, "The visitors' room is out front. This-here is the surgery."

"Toothy," I said, "I'd like your help."

He raised his eyebrows. "How can Old Toothy help a deputy sheriff? Old Toothy's just a menial."

If I tried to placate him, this would go on forever. "Toothy," I said, "I want you to explain locks to me—"

He laughed hollowly. "Just like that, hey? Wants me to lecture and diagnose for him. Wants me to expose an' reveal the secrets of my craft. How do I know you'll always be a deputy. How do I know you ain't fixing to turn burglar? And should I explain it, could you understand it?"

I set my jaw, and took it. After he'd run himself down a little I said, "When I came in I saw you had a Yale on your shop. Now say I had a Yale on my frontdoor back home. Yet if I'd take my key and try it in your lock, it wouldn't even go in. Tell me about that."

Surprisingly, he thought it was a sensible question.

He said, "Most people don't even notice that. All good lockmakers, Yale, Schlage, and the rest, they all do it. That little slot the key goes in, that you'd call a keyhole, in a cylinder lock is called a keyway. Leading lockmakers have from five to a dozen different keyways. To make it double-tough. I won't go into detail but counting five pin lengths on a five-tumbler job, and figuring ten keyways to that particular lock, you've got about one chance in twenty million of opening it with a stray key. Keyways are a wonderful invention."

I pointed to a brass key on the workbench. It was like a regular front door key, without the notches. "That's a key blank?" I asked.

"That's a keyblank. If I have to cut a key I learn the make of lock, and keyway, and cut it according to its pattern from one of my key blanks. You might not know it but only a locksmith can buy the key blanks."

I asked, "How many keyways does the Hacklett lock have?"

"Five. They make a good lock. I don't carry 'em, but I repair 'em."

"When you're repairing a Hacklett, like you were today, like that jimmied closet at Sandcroft's Store, do you take along spare Hacklett blanks, just in case?"

"Why certainly—sure. What's in that closet, Whitey? Why do they keep breaking in? I been out there three times now—"

"Say someone stole a key blank from you that fitted *another* Hacklett keyway, while you were working? Say they already had an impression of a key to this other lock. Couldn't an amateur file down a key of his own to this other lock? The percentage wouldn't be quite one to twenty million then, would it? He'd just take out his nice, new homemade key, unlock that other lock at his pleasure, and walk in."

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Toothy laughed boisterously. "If he could steal it from me. That's the catch! I been in this business a long time, Whitey. I got an eye like a hawk."

I thanked him and left. Out front I opened my mackinaw and laid two screwdrivers, a hacksaw, a machinist's hammer, and three eight-inch files on the sales counter.

Back behind the partition Toothy was filing away, whistling merrily.

If I could lug out his whole toolbox, Preble could palm a little key blank. Things were beginning to make sense.

All the way home, for some reason, my mind kept going back to Hugh Weymouth. I began to wonder if I could be in love with her.

DARKNESS had fallen, spongy and black, when I returned. The sidewalks of Main Street were abandoned and the colonnade before Sandcroft's Store was cold and empty. With dusk had come a freeze and as I turned from Main Street down Church the wheels of my car crunched the saucerlike ice lids that had formed over the puddles in the road ruts. The library was lighted up; I got out and tried the door. It was locked but I heard footsteps. Sally Leland said, "Oh, it's you, Bridge. Come in."

Behind me, she closed the door and locked it. Twice. With a barrelbolt, and a butterfly bolt. I followed her out of the readingroom, neat and modern with buff plaster walls and shiny junior-size desk, down a hall to the cataloguing room. Time had been hanging heavy on her hands, she said, and she dropped in to label a few books.

The cataloguing room was a cubbyhole, cluttered and pleasantly stringent with the scent of shellac, and Miss Leland's geranium toilet water which stood on a wash bowl in the corner. There was a battered rolltop desk, donated, and a glass wallcase of mounted giant moths, left over and unclaimed from last year's hobby show. Miss Leland seated herself, smiled, and I followed suit. She took off her spike-heeled pumps and slipped on a cute pair of tiny buckskin bedroom moccasins. The old fashioned kind with beads and fringe, like I hadn't seen since I was a kid. I started to lay my hat on the floor but she said, "Not there, Bridge. Put it on the desk."

I waited a moment and said, "Oh, I see. My shabby old hat's not good enough for your floor, eh?"

She looked surprised. "I didn't mean that. I just meant that it's dirty."

I smiled bitterly.

She said patiently, "The floor's dirty, Bridge. Not your hat. It's a beautiful hat."

"It's just too young for me, eh? I dress in poor taste, eh?"

She gave me a hard, unfriendly look and said, "What goes on?"

I grinned but it was like grinning at a redheaded iceberg.

Finally, I changed the subject. I said, "They tell me you'll be a bride before long."

I expected a cyclone, but she simply frowned. "I don't know," she said. "I mean I don't know how soon." I got the feeling that she wanted to gossip about it on the theory that the more the story was spread, the more Old Man Sandcroft would find himself committed.

I looked receptive. She pigeonholed her cute little moccasin, ran a thoughtful finger along the arm of her chair, said throatily "If I can make him happy, if I'm what he wants, then I'll be happy. He told me once he'd like a son, a redheaded son, to carry on his name."

I said, "You knew the former Mrs. Sandcroft, didn't you?"

I sat there and looked at her. Suddenly it came over me that she was the one. That she was Preble's next choice. I knew too that I'd really known it all along but something in my mind shied away from admitting it. I sat there and looked at her and wondered whether I'd better tell her or keep it to myself. I decided it was far safer for her if I kept my mouth shut.

She said, "Yes, Bridge. I knew Mrs. Sandcroft, but only casually. Sometimes she'd come in for a book or two."

Out front the telephone purred. Miss Leland padded out in her moccasin feet and called, "It's for you. He says it's important."

Mr. Preble was on the other end. It was important, all right.

He'd found a body. Timberlake of the Planters and Merchants Hotel.

He'd eaten supper at the Redbird Cafe,

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driven into the garage back of his house, and there it was in the center of the cement floor.

Of course he didn't imagine it was a body then. He just thought that somehow Timberlake had hurt himself. He'd piled him into his car and rushed him to Doc Selton. Dead for three hours Doc Selton had said, dead from head injuries. And three hours before Mr. Preble had been locked in the directors' room of the bank. Which just went to show that one never knows. The little trapdoor to the garage loft was open and Mr. Preble and Doc Selton had decided that Timberlake had been trespassing, and up in the loft, and had somehow fallen out on the cement floor on his head. The body was now laid out on a trestle in the backroom of the McGee Drugstore.

He'd seen my car in front of the library and phoned me. Would I hurry over?

I did.

IT WAS about an hour later when I walked up the fieldstone flagged walk to the Weymouth cottage. In the meantime I'd talked to Mr. Preble, and Doc Selton, and examined the garage, and it had all added up to a nice big nothing. The identical nothing which had confronted me twice before. A big nothing composed of one part Mr. Preble in great distress, one part unavoidable accident, and one part corpse.

The Weymouth cottage was a small brick bungalow in a circle of cedars. Evenly spaced, they had been planted as saplings years ago as stationary fenceposts with wire fencing nailed to their trunks, but with the passage of time they had grown and spread until the black bristles of their featherlike branches had met and interwoven over the house itself. Even in the daytime it was a place of perpetual shadow; at night it was a dangerous and lonesome place for a girl to live. It occurred to me that Mrs. Iles' house could be remodelled into a duplex. Rose-colored light came from the old fashioned silk lampshade in the parlor, laid itself against the wet floor of the porch, and was smothered by the tangle of glistening, wintry trees. Hugh answered my ring, led me through the parlor, back into an alcove off her bedroom. A small sewing-room.

She seated herself at the sewing machine, started it whirring, and fed billows of blue taffeta beneath the dancing needle. I pulled up a chair and joined her. I wondered if she was making a curtain, or a dress, or what. I asked, "What are you making?"

She jerked out a piece of thread, chewed it to wisps, said, "I'm making myself a nervous wreck. I belong behind a plow."

I said smugly, "When I'm married, and have a little farm, my wife will never plow. I'll have a hired man for that. She'll lay drain tile, and log, and load hay, but she'll never touch a plow handle!"

Then I told her about Timberlake's death.

She said, "Why?" It didn't make sense to her. She frowned, very obviously trying to fit it in.

There wasn't anything else to do. I told her the whole thing. She was cold, and rigid, and a million miles away from me while I talked.

I said, "You and I both know, Hugh, that your father never embezzled from Sandcroft or anybody else. Preble kept the books and could juggle them as he saw fit. Maybe he was actually cutting himself a slice of loot. Whatever happened, he fixed them up again, enough to eventually placate Old Man Sandcroft. My guess is that Timberlake figured this out himself just after I left him today. Figured it out and talked it over with Preble. What do you think?"

She wasn't paying too much attention. Finally she said, "Every summer Mrs. Sandcroft would go away to this mythical Green Bluff resort. How did her mail reach her? It reached her through my father, right here in town. Through my father who collected it at the Planters and Merchants. I don't like the way this is stacking up."

I tried to change the subject. "I don't want to scare you, Hugh," I said. "But did you know that right this minute Mr. Preble has a key to your front door? A passkey to this nice expensive Hacklett lock? He's had it for a long time, too."

She blinked.

I said, "I will now reveal and expose the secrets of the locksmith's craft." I told her all about Toothy Owens, and keyways. "We can understand that jimmied closet down at the Sandcroft building now. Every time Mr. Preble wanted a passkey to a Hacklett lock he jimmied that door, called in a locksmith.

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and swiped a keyblank. Hacklett locks are common in town. Sandcroft's sell them."

I waited. She seemed unmoved. I said, "The first time, the first key, was for the lock on Mrs. Sandcroft's closet. I don't know what he wanted there, but he must have found it. Maybe good old money. The second was for the lock on your front door. He got the key before your father died. My guess is that he got the key here to search the house. I don't know what he wanted here, either, but he must have found that too."

"That's fine," Hugh Weymouth said. "That suits me perfectly. I only hope he drops in. I sleep with a gun under the mattress."

"Let's consider Timberlake," I said. "He was wild and woolly, and hair-trigger. He carried a knife in his hip pocket. Somehow he never got around to using it. He just fell on his head, and died."

"You don't scare me one bit, Bridge Cotter," she said. "I can see through you like a pane of glass. I'm not moving in to town and sleeping on Mrs. Iles' sofa. I've got more sense than Timberlake, I hope. I'm not even on his list, as I see it. I'll bet you a carload of Weymouth Grain & Lumber Company shingles against a bottle of your favorite snuff that Sally Leland's next. How about it?"

I said, "Now he has three keys. He's used two of them. The third one's got me stumped. He's laying for someone. Who do you suppose?"

"Sally Leland. I'll bet there's a Hacklett lock on that library. I'll bet that some nice dark rainy night while Sally's labelling books, back in the back there, all alone, the lights will go out."

"And Mr. Sandcroft will lose a fiancee?"

"You're not kidding. Mr. Sandcroft, who is too old to get married anyhow, and should be retiring and leaving his business interests in the hands of a younger man, say Mr. Preble's age, will lose a fiancee."

"Hugh," I said, "give me a sample of your father's writing. A letter, anything."

She rummaged through a table drawer, got me an old letter. I put it in my wallet and thanked her.

She walked with me to the front door and we stood for a moment on the porch, in the numbing blackness of the towering cedars. As close as she was, I could scarcely see her. When she spoke, her voice seemed flutelike and stifled. She said, "Bridge, this is terrible."

I started to speak but she cut me off.

"I'm not talking about the deaths," she said. "I mean something else. Mrs. Sandcroft was deceiving her husband. Every summer. My father was helping her. How deeply was he involved?"

"You mean was he having an affair with Mrs. Sandcroft?"

"Of course he wasn't. I'm just asking what you think?"

I was scared to speak. Deliberately, I adjusted my mind. I conjured up a picture of *my* father, undersized and potbellied, in his patched pants and twenty-five cent galluses. I thought of Alice Sandcroft, dainty and expensive and perfumed. I put them together in my mind and by a great effort of will twisted it around to pretend that Hugh had asked me if *my* father had had an affair with Mrs. Sandcroft. It was so funny I guffawed.

I said, "Not in a hundred years! For one thing, he was too busy."

(Busy carving litle monkeys from peach seeds, busy braiding horsehair watch cords, busy being gentle and shiftless and tenderhearted.)

I got it across. Hugh said with relief, "I guess you mean it. I can always tell when you're evading. That's good enough for me. Good night, Bridge."

I said good night and went down the walk to my car.

All the way back into town I thought of squab nests, and wondered if I could still climb.

MAIN STREET was dead and dark. I pulled into the alley by the post-office, turned left, and parked my coupe on the hillside hitchinglot behind Sandcroft's Store. Moonlight bathed the silent alley before me, and the dilapidated backsides of the row of ugly shops and offices. I crossed the alley and entered the backdoor of the Hambleton Building; the Hambleton Building, three doors removed from Sandcroft's, was a warren of empty, mouldering office rooms. I didn't have my flashlight and hoped I wouldn't need it. My fingers located the banister and I ascended to the upper hall.

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I tried to remember back twenty years, to when I was an urchin of eight.

The window was still there, at the end of the hall. I raised it and looked out into the moonlit night. Just below me jutted the narrow roof of the lodgehall backporch. I lowered myself to the rotting shingles, inched along the weatherboards. Finally I found it, the louver. Like a small, slatted window high in the shadows under the eaves.

Time had loosened it in its frame. I removed it and crawled into the black well

beyond. The air was oppressive with the odor of feathers and pigeon nests. Here, in the old days, I used to come squabbing. I was in a little garret, a sort of turret which decorated the center of Main Street. It was Sandcroft's garret and I was over Sandcroft's Store. I brushed the dust at my feet, found a small panel, and opened it.

Three minutes later I was on the ground floor, hunting the aisles and counters for a box of children's crayons. The nightlight burning by the office door was strong enough to make me visible from the street, but too faint to help me in my search.

At last I found them. In School Supplies, on a shelf under Toiletries and Beauty Aids. I selected a red crayon from the box, slipped in a dime to compensate some future kid customers, and went to the bolt-cloth and ribbon counter. Here, on the counter by the scissors and tape measure, was a roll of brown wrapping paper on its rack.

I unrolled about a yard of the wrapping paper, laid it out on the counter, and studied the sample of John Weymouth's handwriting that Hugh had given me. In large imitative letters I wrote: *Help! Help! To Whom it May Concern. Should I fail to live this week out you will find my diary in the far corner of the big cupboard to the left of the door above the zinc-lined sink and the little cistern pump. John Weymouth.*

I rolled the paper back on its rack and let myself out by the nightlatch on the back-door.

I couldn't help smiling. Miss Bobby Lou Middleton held down the bolt-cloth and ribbon counter. Since I'd become deputy she'd led me a dog's life, summoning me at all hours of the night and day. She was a spinster and didn't have much fun, I guess. Burglars were always hiding in her trellis, out of town visitors were always ogling her with evil intent. If it wasn't deadly sin, it was deadly peril.

She'd see my red crayon message about on her first sale. The whole town would know it. She'd have the time of her life screaming her tonsils out.

When I got home there was a note on my pillow saying Hugh Weymouth wanted me to call. That she wanted me to call as soon as possible.

When I got her, her voice was strained and unhappy. She said, "I know what it is, Bridge. I suddenly remembered."

I hadn't the slightest idea what she was talking about.

She said, "I mean that little silk cord you showed me. The one you found in Alice Sandcroft's bedroom closet. I suddenly realized what it is. It's a bootee lace."

"A what?"

"A shoelace for a little baby's shoe."

It was pretty terrible. I said, "But there were at least a hundred of them, Hugh. A whole boxful."

"When her baby died it confused her," Hugh said. "It's none of our business, Bridge. Maybe we'd better forget it."

"Maybe we'd better," I agreed. But I didn't. I worried about it all night long.

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The next morning was cloudy and gray. I switched on my dresser lamp as soon as I got up and rolled a cigarette. Mrs. Iles brought me my hot shaving water in the little blue teapot and made up the bed while I stropped my razor. It always fascinated her to watch me shave. My homemade cigarette always came apart and I had to fight it to keep it lit, and there was lather and tobacco and goodness knows what else as far north as my ears and hair. When I'd finished she said, "They want you at Sandcroft's Store, Bridge. They been here three times but I wouldn't wake you. I just told them you were working on your postage-stamp collection and couldn't be disturbed."

I didn't have a stamp collection. But Mr. Iles had had one. Back in 1910.

In the kitchen, I downed two quick cups of coffee and put a slice of ham between a couple of slices of bread. I asked, "Mrs. Iles, can you make a long distance telephone call?" I told her how to go about it. And jotted down a short list of questions for her to ask. "Call Nashville first. They should be able to give you a lead. You may have to make two dozen calls before you're finished. Tell them you're the law. Tell them you're Sheriff Cotter's personal secretary."

SHE took the paper from my hands. "I'll get it," she said grimly. And I knew she would. I finished my sandwich on the run.

To my surprise there was no sign of excitement at all when I arrived at Sandcroft's. A few bored customers loitered here and there over the dark counters, and business seemed about as usual. Then I noticed that the roll of wrapping paper had vanished from the ribbon department—and that Miss Bobby Lou Middleton had a tight look about the jaws, and a wild, explosive gleam in her deepest eyes. They'd caught her in time and ordered her to clam up. She was existing in torment. She tried to smile—and waved listlessly toward the rear. I went down the cluttered aisle, knocked on the office door, and entered.

The wrapping paper, metal rack and all, was on the desk. With the red crayon message face up on the desktop. Old Man Sandcroft was leaning over it, studying it through his specs, as though he were gazing at bugs in cornmeal. In a far corner sat Sally Leland, silent and interested, in a cute little cloth coat with a fur collar. The collar was about the size of a muff and she sat hunched down into it so that it came up past her nose, almost to her eyes. She was watching Mr. Preble. It was as though she were back there in ambush, watching him over a brushpile. I said, "What's the trouble?" and they all pointed to the paper.

I strolled over, and read it aloud. "Help! Help! To whom it may concern. Should I fail to live this week out, you will find my diary in the corner of the big cupboard, to the left of the door, above the zinc-lined sink and little cistern pump. John Weymouth."

"How horrible," Sally Leland said. "He must have had a premonition that Hal Lafferty's empty poultry truck was going to roll down that hillside and kill him!"

Mr. Preble said, "John Weymouth didn't write that, Miss Leland. It's a forgery, and a not particularly bright one. The forger used crayon, wrote big, and laid the paper over the rough counter to make a rough job. It's absurd to suppose that John Weymouth would leave such a message to be found months later. Unroll the paper, roll it back up again? Ridiculous. He would have simply confided in his friends. In me."

"John Weymouth didn't write that," Old Man Sandcroft said crisply. "It's a waste of good paper and John had a sense of property values."

I said, "I don't think he did either. I think it's a joke."

They all nodded.

"Now that we were in agreement that it was a fake," Mr. Preble said, "I can't quite get what he's writing about. Take that zinc-lined sink. Zinc-lined sinks went out thirty years ago. I don't imagine there's one in the whole county. Certainly there's none here, or at his home."

"There's no cistern pump at his home either," Sally Leland said. Her eyes were half closed and her brain was going a million miles an hour. "He must have been thinking of someplace else. It's too much for me!"

I cleared my throat. "It's all a joke. Remember?"

Old Man Sandcroft was in a cold fury. "Enough paper wasted to wrap fifty spools

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of thread," he said. "Things like this cost money."

Mrs. Iles had big news for me at lunch. She'd made eight long distance calls, and had finally run it down.

"The place is the Woodsdale House," she said placidly. "Just outside of Chattanooga. It's just what you thought. They knew her under her right name, Alice Sandcroft, and described her to a T. What does it mean, Bridge?"

"I'll tell you tonight," I said. "When it's all over."

THE afternoon and early evening dragged by in long ragged minutes of torture and there were times, as I sat alone in my room, that I actually wished for Mr. Iles's stamp collection to keep my mind off my worries. My car was in a friend's garage blocks away in the fond hope that if Mr. Preble should take it upon himself to pry, he'd think I was out of town. At seven o'clock I put on my gun, picked up my flashlight, and left. I'd given the time a good deal of thought. Seven o'clock seemed plenty early and I was prepared to wait the night out if I had to. I knew by now that he was a slick customer, too slick for Bridgman Cotter, and my only hope as I saw it was to catch him redhanded, flash my big flashlight in his face, and recite my list of suspicions as facts.

He thought he was perfect. He'd crumble all over the place.

I had it all figured out.

There was no moon and a cold wind whipped the rattling treetops. I took a network of alleys to the edge of town, passed over the creek at the slaughterhouse bridge, and came out before an ancient seven foot board fence. Quietly, I stepped through the rotting gate and was in the backyard of the Planters and Merchants. To my left, a few feet away, was the shapeless hulk of the tumbledown barn; dead ahead, through the chasm of dark, I could make out the smoky sensation of the hotel itself, nebulous in the night, without form or substance. Right here things began to go sour. I couldn't see the kitchen door. I couldn't see the porch door. I couldn't even see the porch.

I picked a dark corner between the barn and the fence—where he'd have to pass me coming in—sat on my heels, hillman style, and settled down for a wait. I figured he'd have to show a light in the kitchen, if only for a split second, and that would be all I needed.

I waited an hour and a half.

My education stopped with high school but a high-school education has been to me what a college education has been to a lot of other fellows. I took it seriously and I think I got something out of it. Not what they taught me, but something of my own, something personal. Lots of times when I get in a jam I use what I learned in those four years like a painter uses the colors on his palette. I mix them up according to my own secret system and use them as abstract symbols for concrete thinking. I considered Mr. Preble, his character and actions, as a senior debating problem. I reduced him to elements and worked him out in Advanced Chemistry. I broke him down into algebraic equations. And with every treatment I got the same answer. And it disturbed me.

What I got was this: He'd already come and gone.

He'd come in the daylight because I thought he wouldn't dare. He'd out-tricked me before and he'd certainly out-trick me now—because this was the big one, and he was scared.

FEELING plenty foolish, I got to my feet and entered the kitchen. There was no sense of concealment now and I turned on my flashlight. Angrily, I played the beam about me. At the cobwebbed ceilings, high and grand, at the crudely boarded windows, at the old zinc-lined sink with its little hand pump. A chair had been pulled up here, and above the sinkboard a cupboard door was ajar. I mounted the chair, swung my light inside, and saw the swirling smudges on the dusty shelves where Mr. Preble's gloved hands had searched for John Weymouth's nonexistent diary.

I climbed down. Timberlake had spilled biscuit flour on the drainboard and I brushed it off my coatfront. My shoes were smeared with clay from the creekbank and I cleaned them the best I could with my handkerchief. In my pocket was a peanut butter sandwich and a couple of hard boiled eggs that Mrs. Iles had fixed up for me. I'd figured on a

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nightlong vigil, and they were to be my daybreak breakfast. When I get mad I get hungry, so I ate them.

There was only one possibility left, as I saw it, and that one was mighty slim. Mr. Preble's garage loft. Timberlake had evidently actually been prowling it, it appeared. Both Doc Selton and Mr. Preble himself had spoken of the trapdoor being open. I'd been wondering what had attracted Timberlake up a ladder to a garage loft. I decided to take a look for myself.

I closed the kitchen door, made my way across the dark yard past the barn, and out into the alley. You could have shot a pistol off by my ear and I wouldn't have heard it. I was really burning.

And that was what almost happened.

I didn't suspect it then of course, and didn't learn the details till later. But when I passed the barn he was standing just inside with a pistol in his hand, trying to decide whether or not to finish me off.

He decided no, because he specialized in accidents and even Doc Selton wouldn't have called a deputy sheriff with a bullet hole in the back of his head an accident.

As I walked down the alley he, too, made tracks for the garage. I didn't know that either, of course, but I took a shortcut and beat him.

THE Preble homestead was out on South Oak. Mr. Fowler Preble, the last of his race, had closed the upper story and confined his bachelor's quarters to the ground floor. The place had white pillars and a scrawny rose arbor by the portico. It was blazing with light; there seemed to be festivities going on. The big garage, sheltered from the house by a lilac hedge, was in a patch of shadow by the alleymouth. The doors were open and I entered.

Inside, in the dark, Miss Sally Leland's little coupe was snuggling up to Mr. Preble's old-fashioned bathtub limousine. I found the loft ladder nailed to the wall and climbed.

A quick beam from my flashlight showed me that the loft was as empty and bare as an old breadbox. Timberlake hadn't been up here, no one had been up here in years. This was the end of the trail. I turned off my torch, said, "Well, Bridgman, he's euchred you again," and started down the ladder rungs.

About halfway down, eternity rose up out of the blackness and smote me.

It smote me a glancing blow, with a power that was terrific, crashing first against the wall, exploding almost in my face, ripping the ladder from its fastenings.

When my brain cleared I was on my hands and knees, on the cement floor. Just like Timberlake.

I groped for my torch and couldn't locate it. I located something else, though. Three sticks of dynamite in the corner and some copperwire. Up against the wall there was a heavy mattock.

A mattock. He'd given me the best swing he had but he'd been too crowded. There'd been too many automobiles. The garage had been empty when he'd worked on Timberlake.

I got to my feet, got my breathing under control, and started for the house.

Sally Leland answered my ring and let me in. I said, "Howdy, Miss Leland. I didn't know you were a friend of Mr. Preble's." She looked sweet sixteen, and mighty attractive. She said, "I'm not. But this is a sort of party. Are you invited?" One of my cheeks was skinned from jaw to ear.

I said, "Yes, Miss Leland. I'm invited."

She led me down the hall into the livingroom.

The Preble livingroom had gray walls and the floor was covered by rumpled red carpet. A row of dusty daguerreotypes of Preble ancestors lined the white marble mantelshelf and an unseasoned, juicy log spluttered and spit in the fireplace. Mr. Preble was nowhere in sight but Mr. Sandcroft was on hand, and enjoying himself. He'd pulled a red velvet loveseat up to an ebony claw-and-ball table and was drinking chocolate. He drank it by holding the cup between thumb and forefinger and dipping his pursed lips to the rim. Like a duck diving for frogs. He said, "Hello, Whitey," as though I were delivering groceries and had wandered in out of the scullery. Miss Leland sat down beside him and somehow, the way she did it, made me feel that I'd crashed into a little private betrothal celebration. That Mr. Preble was doing the honors for his employer. By Miss Leland's arm was a big

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brass cuspidor and a bucket of pink begonias.

I asked, "Where's Mr. Preble?"

"Down at McGee's getting ice cream," Miss Leland said. She didn't sound particularly elated. She was getting a preview of her future, hot chocolate, ice cream, brass cuspidors, and pink begonias.

On the tabletop before Mr. Sandcroft was his bulbous silver watch. He glanced at it crossly.

I settled myself on a chair by the wall and waited. About three minutes later Mr. Preble came in from the kitchen with a tray. Three plates of ice cream and a saucer of peanut brittle. When he saw me he looked annoyed and said, "I'll fix you up in the kitchen, Bridgman."

Mr. Sandcroft picked up his watch and displayed it. "Minutes are golden, sir," he said sternly.

Sally Leland said, "Maybe Bridge didn't just come for the refreshments, maybe he's got something on his mind?"

I nodded, opened my mouth—and words wouldn't come.

Mr. Sandcroft was stowing his watch in his vest pocket. I watched him fumble around and suddenly realized what I was looking at. Across his coat from side to side, about on the level with his tummy, was a smudge of white flour. Exactly the same kind of smudge I'd got myself out at the Planters and Merchants, leaning against Timberlake's sink, looking into the cupboards. He'd tried to beat it out but the coat was black broadcloth and it showed up like chalk.

Keeping my voice as steady as I could, I said, "Mr. Sandcroft, I'm afraid I'm going to have to arrest you for murder."

HE ALMOST dropped his watch.

I said, "I've consulted Sheriff Collins about this, sir. I'm not exceeding my authority."

He juggled the watch into his pocket, said faintly, "Sheriff Collins? Did you say Sheriff Collins?"

I nodded.

Things that had had me sweating blood now suddenly fell into place. Everything had a reason. Everything had an answer. Just like in Advanced Chemistry. I said, "Miss Leland, how long has he been here? I mean how long before I came myself?"

"About one minute," she said. My old friend Fowler Preble looked stupefied. He laid down the tray, gently.

I said, "Here's what happened. When Alice Sandcroft lost her baby, the blow was almost too much for her. Almost, but not quite. To help her sustain herself, she spent the summers away from here. She kept her whereabouts from her husband by a tricky mailing ruse. Letters sent to her eventually wound up at the Planters and Merchants, where Mr. John Weymouth called for them. Mr. Sandcroft got suspicious and investigated. The trail, as he saw it, ended here at the Planters and Merchants. Here with Mr. John Weymouth. It seemed obvious to him that while his wife was pretending to be away at a non-existent resort called Green Bluff Caverns she was actually in clandestine contact with Weymouth. Sandcroft went crazy with jealousy—"

Mr. Sandcroft was trembling now. Trembling with fear and rage. He said, "At all times I'm calm and collected. I never go crazy."

"So he killed his wife, and killed John Weymouth," I said. "He killed Timberlake, too. And took a crack at me. And all for nothing. He found that out too late. Alice Sandcroft and John Weymouth were completely innocent—"

"She locked her bedroom closet," Mr. Sandcroft exclaimed. "No wife has a right to deprive her lawfully wedded husband of ingress and egress!"

"Innocent?" Sally Leland asked.

"Of course," I said. "She spent her summers at an orphanage just outside Chattanooga known as Woodsdale House. As a volunteer worker. I don't know why she kept it from her husband, but she knew him better than we do and she must have had a reason. Summers at Woodsdale House and winters here in town, sewing for them. Making baby clothes and baby shoes." I added pointedly, "That explains the locked bedroom closet."

Mr. Sandcroft said hoarsely, "I was saving my honor. Court records are full of cases where—"

He thought he'd been perfect and now he was crumbling all over the place. Just like I'd figured. Only I'd figured Mr. Preble—and this was Mr. Sandcroft.

I said, "I'm taking him into the county

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seat now to charge him. Mr. Preble, will you call the sheriff and tell him we're on our way?"

Mr. Preble looked paralyzed. He said, "What?"

Sally Leland reached for the phone. "I'll take care of it," she said. She seemed suddenly different, suddenly released. She wasn't going to miss that library endowment.

THE day Hugh Weymouth and I went into the county seat for a diamond ring she wore a new taffeta dress. After I'd finished a little business at the courthouse we dropped in on Charlie Setter at the *Clarion* office. He pulled chairs around his old pot-bellied stove, bowed Hugh into his favorite lyre-backed rocker, and began to question me.

"He thought she was having an affair with Mr. Weymouth," I said, "and he was crazy jealous. The three passkeys told the story. The first passkey was to his wife's bedroom closet. He searched it first, and then killed her. Next came the passkey to Weymouth's house, which he searched, and Weymouth's death. He had all three keys on him when he was arrested and spilled the whole story."

Charlie Setter got out a warped and shattered cigar, patched its air vents up with scraps of wet newspaper, clipped it with a pair of fourteen inch copy scissors, and touched it to the redhot stove. When it was giving off a vile smoke, he asked, "Why you, Bridge? Why did he try to kill you?"

"I overplayed my hand. When I went back in the passage that night and dusted the jimmy for prints, he spied on me."

Hugh Weymouth said, "Here's something you never told me. And I have to know! Three victims, you say, and three keys. Who was the third key for? Who was the third intended victim? Was it Sally Leland?"

I could tell from the way that they were looking at me that I was as red as a tomato. I said, "I miscalculated slightly. The third key was for Mr. Preble."

They were courteous enough not to laugh.

I said, "Timberlake came to Mr. Sandcroft and told him that he'd read those letters. He told him about Sandcroft's letter to his wife accusing Weymouth of embezzling. This was just an attempt to slur Weymouth in Alice Sandcroft's mind, of course. The whole thing was purely a figment, the books were in perfect condition. Preble kept them. Sandcroft was afraid Timberlake had talked to Preble, too, was afraid Preble had information on him but was keeping it quiet. The third key was for Preble's garage."

Charlie Setter said, "So the dynamite in the garage was for Preble's car? The dynamite and the copper wire?"

"Yes. The garage was a convenient place to eliminate Timberlake too, incidentally."

A muscled hill mule plodded by below the window dragging a makeshift wagon of heater-wood. Across the street a boy in overalls and a frayed sweater came out of a hardware store with a string of new steel-traps. These were my people and this was my country. I felt relaxed, secure.

I said conversationally, "Anyway you look at it, it was my toughest murder case."

They were too polite to mention that it was my first and only one.

Hugh Weymouth was staring at me, deep and hard and intent. Finally, she said, "Let's all quit while we're ahead."

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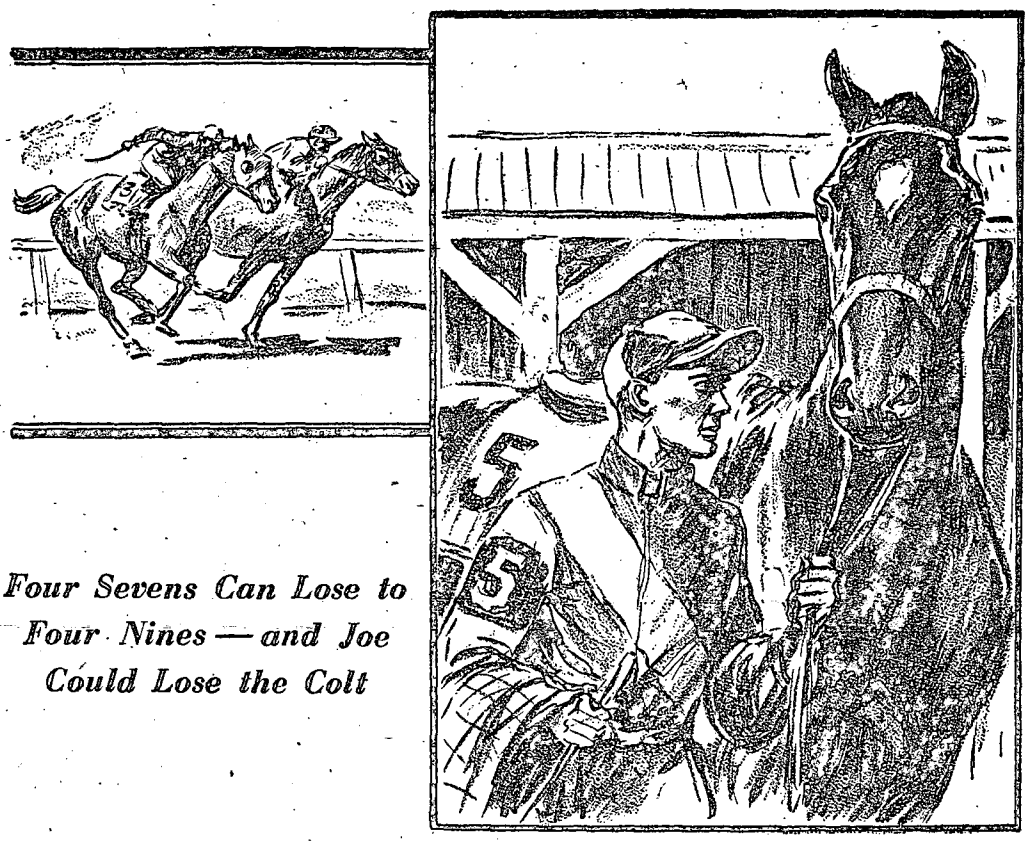

Four Sevens Can Lose to Four Nines — and Joe Could Lose the Colt

THERE were a couple times I almost went back to the Randalls, only Joe had so much faith in the colt, and Joe needed me. Joe used to train for the Randalls and I used to ride for them, only Joe convinced me you'll never get anywhere working for somebody else.

But I can't kick about the way they treated me, and neither can Joe. This gypsy life is usually for guys who never had it better, and that doesn't fit Joe and me.

Especially, it doesn't fit Joe, whose folks had money once and sent him to school to make a vet out of him. I don't know about my folks, because the Randalls got me from a Home. It sort of seemed like I was deserting them when I hit the road with Joe and Ernest Endeavor. That's our colt, Ernest Endeavor.

He's a lot of colt, we think, and I will prove himself one of these days. Maybe I'd better say that's what Joe thinks, and I usually agree with him. I have to, or this trip wouldn't make sense, leaving a place like the Randall's, where I had it so good.

Endeavor had never proved himself as a two year old, being too wild and running too wide on the turns. Joe said a runout bit would take care of the running wide and Joe, himself, would take care of the wildness. Joe always looks on the brightest side and I wish I could be more like him, and I'm trying to.

Well, we were eating.

We came to Bridle Haven the first week in June after two flats and a wrecked fuel pump and a new timing gear. If Joe's as wrong about Ernest Endeavor as he is about his car, we're in for a rough time.

Bridle Haven's no Pimlico, you understand. It's a half-mile oval with a 650 foot stretch, sandy clay, and if they can get a thousand customers into the stands, they're going good.

I guess my folks must have been horse people, though, because there's something about a race track that makes me feel at home. The horses are working out, and the stables are so dim and smell so good, and there's still dew on the infield grass.

Joe said, "Well, here we are."

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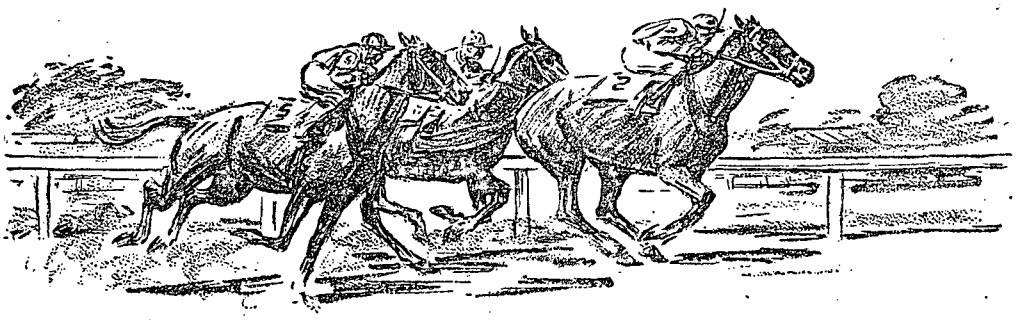

A Colt For The Carlton

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

I didn't say anything.

"Seeking our fortune," Joe went on, "in the best American tradition. What are you so quiet about, Ed?"

"I'm just looking," I said. "I sure love a race track."

Joe sighed and said, "Oh. I thought for a second I was going to get another lecture about leaving the Randalls. You happy all the time, Ed?"

"I'm all right," I said. "I'd better walk Endeavor around until you see about getting a stable, huh?"

"Do that," he said. He came down to help me get Endeavor out of the trailer.

Then he unhooked the trailer, and drove off to see about getting a stable.

ENDEAVOR tossed his head and pounded with one forefoot a little and he seemed kind of scornful as he looked the layout over. Endeavor's by Trial out of Miss Hopeful and he never forgets it.

He's coal black except for his star and sort of chunky, I thought, for a money horse. But Joe knows more about those things than I do. Joe says nothing looks less like a race horse than a race horse.

I walked Endeavor along shedrow, and he kept snorting in that way he has, and then a kid came along leading a filly and Endeavor stopped snorting, and arched his neck and walked just as pretty as though he was parading to the post in the Derby.

The filly whinnied, but Endeavor looked straight ahead as though he didn't notice. He hasn't got the looks, but he's got the attraction, for some reason.

Then the filly went into a stable, and Endeavor looked around and snorted again.

I took him over to the grass behind the stables, and walked him around and around until Joe came back.

Joe said, "Hungry, Ed?"

"I'm always a little hungry," I said, and he looked at me suspiciously.

"Because I'm still growing," I said. "I'm not kicking."

"There's a grill at the clubhouse," he said, "though I wouldn't guarantee what I've seen of the food."

It tasted all right to me, but Joe's kind of fussy about his eating. One thing about a Home, you learn to eat practically anything you can chew.

Joe watched me put away the stew, and said, "We could save money if I'd just buy you a bale of hay. It couldn't taste any worse than stew."

"This helps me grow," I said. "It's got vegetables in it."

He smiled, and said, "Ed, I wish I could be more like you. You're so sensible and practical and sound."

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"I have to be," I said. "A guy's got to look out for himself."

"Not all the time, Ed," he said. "That's what gives us all the troubles in this world, too many people looking out for themselves."

When he studied to be a vet, Joe had to take some other subjects, too, and one of them must have been philosophy.

"Well," I said, "I've got to kind of look out for you, too. So you don't go off the deep end."

"That's the talk," he said. "Now you're developing a social consciousness."

"If it wouldn't be too much," I said, "I'd like another dish of that stew."

He laughed. "Where do you put it, Ed? A man your size, and you eat more than I do." Then he called out to the girl. "Another bowl of stew for the boss."

While he was watching me eat that, he told me about what he'd planned. "We'll win a couple here," he said, "for traveling money, for eating money. These will be fine tighteners."

"And then—?" I said.

"And then we go to Lyndovia."

"Money horses up there," I said. "Unless you planned on the claimers."

He shook his head. "I'm thinking of the big one, up there, Ed. I'm thinking of the Carlton Stakes."

The Carlton Stakes. . . . That's what I mean about Joe. He buys a colt for two thousand dollars and wants to put him in the Carlton Stakes. I was figuring twenty-five hundred dollar claimers would be reaching for Endeavor, but Joe wants the Carlton Stakes.

I didn't say anything, nothing at all.

But he said, "I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong, Ed."

"Could I have a piece of pie?" I said.

NEXT morning, I worked Endeavor out, just breezing, to get the kinks out of him. He loafed all through it; Endeavor never tries in his workouts. He's a horse needs competition.

Then a filly comes along, moving smartly, and I dig Endeavor and he answers the call and we move together into the turn. This filly is on the outside, and the boy on him has a thin, rat face. He tries to crowd me.

He must have thought I had hay in my hair, or something. I gave him the bat across the face, and then I gave Endeavor a taste of it, and we moved away from the filly like she was tied.

I'm just kicking along as we round the south, and there's Joe at the fence, so I pull up.

Joe isn't alone. There's a girl standing next to him, and it doesn't take more than one look to tell me she's not in my class, not at all.

Joe looks hot about something. He said, "Did you strike that boy on Milady?"

"I hit somebody, but I didn't recognize the horse," I said. "A rat-faced guy. He had the whole track, but he tried to crowd me."

"That was Miss Meredith's jockey," Joe said. "What's got into you, Ed?"

"Nothing new," I said. "He tried to rough me, and I let him know I wasn't born yesterday. Anything seem to be wrong with that?"

"Don't be flippant," Joe said. "After this, try to act like a gentleman."

I should have spoken up, but I figured he was trying to impress the lady, so I just nodded.

I walked Endeavor around and rubbed him down, and went out to sit in front of the stable. In a little while Joe came along, and he didn't look so mad, any more.

"Some girl, huh, Ed?" he said.

"I guess I've seen worse," I said. "Is she rich?"

"She was, at one time," Joe said. "She's from an old Southern family, and now all she has left is that filly, and her loyal jockey. Class will tell, though, won't it? You thought she had money."

"Because of her clothes, not her face," I said. "She should get rid of that loyal, rat-faced jock."

"You could be wrong about him," Joe said. "Don't judge people too quickly, Ed."

"I won't if you won't," I said.

"And don't forget I'm feeding you," he said.

"I ate better at the Randalls," I answered. "If you want me to go back there, just say so."

He looked at me for a couple seconds, and then he said quietly, "Do *exactly* what you want to, about that, Ed. I haven't any strings on you."

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"If you don't need me," I said, "I'll pack right now." I got up, and looked at him.

"Ed," he said, "if you're going to leave me, don't leave me in that frame of mind. You know I like you, and need you. I want you to do what will make you happiest."

"I haven't any kick coming. We've been getting along," I said, "until this Miss Meredith showed up."

"All right," he said, "we won't talk about her. Sit down, and I'll tell you about the time a horse of my dad's won the Carlton."

He sure could tell a story. He'd make you forget where you were, and everything would come alive, and he knew just where to put the punch into it.

When he finished, I said, "That's why you've got your heart set on it, isn't it? That's why you picked that one race?"

"That's the dream, Ed," he said, and his voice was soft. "And nothing's going to interfere with it."

I thought of Miss Meredith, but as long as he wasn't mentioning her, I wasn't going to. I don't know why I shouldn't like her, only she looked like poison to me.

We were in a claimer, the very next day. Joe told me about it in the morning. "Can't risk him often in these," he said. "Win if you can, but don't take any chances."

I was just taking him over to the track when he told me. I figured there'd be a railbird or two along the fence with a clock, so I kept Endeavor under wraps. It would be murder if some gypsy with a sharp eye should claim him. Joe's plans would go all to hell.

Endeavor is ornery about it. Usually, I can't make him work out with any pepper at all, but this morning he's full of run. He keeps straining at the bit and I have a big job holding him in my lap.

When we go past the third furlong post and come into the grandstand stretch, I can see that Miss Meredith sitting in one of the deserted boxes. That jerky looking jock is with her, and he's got a clock in his hand, I can tell.

Well, I hadn't shown them anything to run to the secretary about. And if they judged Endeavor on his looks, they wouldn't be likely to put in a claim. I saw him put his watch away.

Joe was near the gate, and I told him, "Miss Meredith and her boy are over in one of those boxes. He was clocking me."

"Miss Meredith?" Joe said, and looked happy. "I'll see you later, Ed." He went over that way, walking fast.

Endeavor was still full of run, so I let him work out some more, but not showing anything. When I went past the grandstand again, Joe was chatting with the two of them like it was Old Home Week, or something. I could see the welt on the jockey's face, and that shouldn't make me happy, but it did. He didn't take his eyes off me once.

Then I took Endeavor in and cooled him off, and went up to the grill alone for something to eat. The waitress there said, "Where's your buddy, this morning?"

Joe seems to have the same attraction Endeavor has for the ladies.

I said, "He's out in the grandstand, talking to his girl."

"Oh," she said, and didn't look so breezy any more.

I had eggs and toast and milk. Most jocks live on grass and pickle juice, but I'm small-boned and compact and never put on weight.

Joe came in while I was still eating, smiling and cheerful, and said to the waitress. "What's good today, honey?"

"My name is Sylvia," she said, "not Honey. Everything's as good as you can expect in a dump like this."

Joe looked surprised and ordered eggs.

To me, he said, "You never can tell about a woman, can you, Ed?"

"I guess not," I said, "but I don't know much about them."

"Feel ready?" Joe asked me.

"I'm always ready," I said. "I think Endeavor's ready, too."

"Good," Joe said, looking pleased. "Fine."

"If he wins this afternoon," I went on, "no more claimers, huh, Joe? If he shows his stuff, this afternoon, they'll all be waiting to pick him up."

"I won't take any chances after today," he promised.

I was through eating before he was, and I went back to the stable alone. I was nervous. Riding for the Randalls, I didn't have to worry much; I was going to eat, win or lose. But Joe and me had our futures tied up in this horse.

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I sat in the stable, talking to Endeavor, explaining to him about how important it was, and he nodded, and stamped one forefoot. He certainly looked intelligent, and I wouldn't be surprised if he understood what I was trying to get across to him.

It was a warm day, but cloudy, and the dust wouldn't be bad nor the track too hard. Endeavor doesn't like a hard track.

Joe came in, and he looked nervous, too. "Give him a good ride, Ed," he said. "This is a step toward the Carlton, Ed. Don't make any mistakes."

IT WAS the third race we were in, and the grandstand was loaded when I went over to the paddock to saddle up. Endeavor was jumpy, acting up, but I quieted him, after a while. When we paraded to the post, you'd think he was royalty, so high-stepping and proud.

The filly was in this one, and Miss Meredith's boy aboard him. He didn't look at me. Milady looked at Endeavor and sort of simpered, but Endeavor didn't even notice her, he was acting so proud.

The rest of the field looked like goats, but you can never tell when these gypsies will drop a sleeper in a run like this. That's what we were doing.

Most of them were quiet, but Milady was acting up, trying to get Endeavor's attention.

Then the field was quiet, the webbing flashed, and we were off.

Endeavor took off like a rocket, and I didn't have him in hand until we went past the grandstand for the first time. He hadn't lost any of his morning's pepper; I knew this one was in the bag.

He seemed to know it, too. Into the far turn, I could feel him ease up, and I shook him out a little, but he just kept loafing.

I could hear the drumming coming up behind like low thunder, and I thought we were actually going to get swamped, for a second.

Then this Milady's nose showed, alongside, and I put my heels into Endeavor, and the two of us paced it out into the backstretch. This Milady had been spurned, and she was going to win, or run her heart out, that's for sure.

We went pounding down the stretch, and Endeavor was trying, now. Trying, and moving away, lengthening the gap, running like a scared rabbit.

Going away, making them all look bad into the turn, starting to go wide, but I brought him back with no nonsense, and it was all ours, I knew, after a glance behind.

I was pulling him up, long before we went past the wire, all alone.

The crowd was making an awful racket, and I was limp and scared, wondering if there'd been a claim in the box. Because I knew now, what Joe had known all along. This was a lot of colt. Nobody would have to be ashamed of this colt, in *any* company.

In the winner's circle, and I saw Joe in the crowd, and waved, and he waved back. He looked as proud as Endeavor.

Back at the stable, Joe said, "No claim. What a blind bunch of gyps these are. They don't know a horse from a cow. No claim, Ed."

"We were lucky," I said. "And no more claimers, Joe?"

"You think I'm crazy?" he asked me. "Don't answer that. Ed, I've already sent the fee in for the Carlton. We've got a winner, Ed."

"Stake horse," I said. Only *we* didn't have him; Joe did. No jockey can own a race horse, nor any part of a race horse. But *we* could own a farm, with the money Endeavor would win us. A stake horse, to build us a stake. And a breeding farm, with *our* money.

Joe sighed, and shook his head. "I'm going to celebrate, tonight, Ed. I'm going to find some allowances we can enter him in, too. No more claimers. But I'm going to celebrate, tonight, and so are you."

"Not me," I said. "I'm too excited. I think I'm going to be sick, Joe."

And I was.

That's why I didn't go with him that night. That's where I made the mistake of my life.

I went to bed about ten, but I couldn't sleep. Around midnight, I got up. Joe wasn't in, yet, and I was worried. I sat by the window at the front, and I could see the sidewalk and the street below in the streetlight. Not many people out there.

At one o'clock there wasn't anybody. And about 1:30, I saw Joe's car come along and go up the alley at the side of the hotel. A couple of minutes later, Joe came out of

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the alley and walked to the front door of the hotel.

When I saw the tired, licked way he was walking, I got scared. He wasn't staggering much, but he looked all beat out. I went to open the door, to wait for him.

When he came down the hall, he didn't look at me. He kept looking at the carpet in the hallway. He pushed past me, and sat in the big, worn chair in the room. He just stared at the wall.

I was almost afraid to ask, but I asked, "What happened, Joe?"

For a couple seconds, he just stared at me. Then he said, "I lost Endeavor. I lost him in a poker game, Ed."

I sat down on the bed, and tried to make some sense out of what he was saying. I thought, for a second, maybe I was dreaming. Maybe I was asleep, and this was all a dream. And I waited. But I was awake, all right.

"In a poker game," I said. "You wouldn't bet Endeavor in a poker game. A guy would be crazy to be like—Joe, what do you mean?"

He shook his head, his mouth open. Then he sort of swallowed. "Four sevens—" he said. "How can four sevens get beat? I'd have bet my life, only who'd want it? It's not worth anything. Four sevens—you could bet everything you own."

"You did," I said. "Joe—what—?"

"Don't ask me," he said, "I don't know. I bet the colt against three thousand dollars. And he had four nines."

"He—? Who, Joe?"

"Monk," he said. "Monk Rekord."

"Don't know him," I said.

"That jock, that boy of Miss Meredith's. Four nines, he had."

"Gambling's illegal," I said, "and no jock can own a horse. We'll get him back. We'll see the sheriff, Joe. It must have been a crooked game."

Joe looked at me steadily. "I wagered him, and I lost him." He stood up. "You'd better go back to the Randalls, Ed. I guess this is the end of us, Ed." He walked to the door, and out.

I just sat there on the bed, and watched him walk out. Right then I didn't give a damn where he went, or how long he stayed. I thought he was just going down to the washroom, but he could have gone to China, for all I cared. I was miserable. I thought I was too old to cry.

But I wasn't.

And then I must have been tired, because when I came to, again, the sun was coming in the window and therre was nobody else in the room.

Joe's bed hadn't been slept in.

I DRESSED quick, and went over to the stables, but Joe wasn't there, either. Endeavor was still there; he whinnied when I came in, and I went over to rub his nose.

I was standing there when that rat-face, that Monk Rekord came in. "I've come for the horse," he said.

"Sure," I said. "You want the needle, too?"

"Needle—?" He looked at me queerly.

"You'll need it," I said. "He's a hophead."

"What are you trying to give me?" he said. "I suppose he was hopped up yesterday?"

"Right up to the ears," I said. "You'll learn, first time out."

"So," he said, "he didn't cost us anything. He'll do for claimers."

I didn't answer that. I went outside, and over to the grill, and the waitress was there and I asked her if she'd seen Joe.

She hadn't, she said. She looked at me and said:

"What's happened?"

"I don't know," I said. I didn't want to think what had happened, maybe. I went back to the hotel.

The clerk over there said, "I missed you this morning, Mr. Reed. This note and envelope was left for you."

The note was from Joe and it said:

Ed:

I sold the trailer, and here's enough to get back to Randalls. It was fun while it lasted, wasn't it, Ed? Good-bye, kid. I let you down.

Joe

The envelope had fifty dollars in it, in tens. I didn't want to go back to the Randalls, I knew now. I just wanted to travel with Joe and Ernest Endeavor. I just wanted to kick around with the two of them and see the country. Joe and me, we could learn

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a lot from each other, especially me. I'd already learned how much I needed Joe.

I took a bus back to the Randalls that afternoon.

He's a hard man, Mr. Randall. He's all right, and not tight or mean or crooked, but he's from a horse background and he had to make his own way, and he's hard.

He sat in the library of his big house and listened to my story all the way through, never smiling or frowning or saying anything, just listening.

When I finished, he said, "You think a lot of the colt, don't you, Ed?"

"He's a stake horse," I said. "Nobody knows him like I do, Mr. Randall." Then I added, "Nobody but Joe."

"And you lied about him to those people, to this Monk?"

"Yes, sir, I did. But I don't think it's a sin, lying to people like that."

He smiled a little, now. "We'll let that pass. But the rest of it—" He shook his head. "You want me to claim the horse, in Joe's name. You want me to turn him over to you. That's the same as a loan, and what would your collateral be?"

"The colt," I answered, "Ernest Endeavor."

"But if he's worth all this, why shouldn't I claim him for myself?"

"You're taking a chance. If you claim him for Joe, we'll pay you back, pay you back *double*, when we win the Carlton."

He shook his head. "Ed—don't you see all the possibilities you've overlooked? Maybe these people won't enter him in claimers. Maybe they'll realize his value."

"I don't think so," I said. "Endeavor's lazy. You've got to understand him—like Joe does, and I do."

"Maybe you won't have a Chinaman's chance in the Carlton."

"I mean to try," I said.

He paused now, studying me. "And maybe you'll never see Joe, again."

It was awful quiet in the library. I said, "I've got to see Joe, again. He'll—he can't—he wouldn't—" Then I had to stop.

It was still quiet in there while Mr. Randall looked at me. He looked at me for a long time, and finally he said, "I guess it's only because I never had a kid of my own. We'll go up to Bridle Haven tomorrow, Ed."

I slept there that night. Mrs. Randall sure fed me. She knows what I like. And I slept in a big, soft bed with clean smelling sheets, and slept pretty good, considering everything.

When I woke up in the morning, I looked out the window and I could see all the hills, and the long white stables, and the track Mr. Randall had for his work-outs, and the big garage, with all the cars. I must be a jerk, all right, turning my back on that, and seeking my fortune in the best American tradition, like that crazy Joe says.

Mrs. Randall was crying when we left in the Caddy. Mr. Randall said, "Now, Sarah, don't carry on like that. Everything's going to be all right, isn't it, Ed?"

"It sure is," I said. "You don't ever have to worry about me, Mrs. Randall. You're never going to have to be ashamed of me."

"Ashamed—?" she said. "Oh, Ed, you crazy kid. You just remember you've always got a home here."

"I'll be proud to remember it," I said. "When I think of home, this is the place I always think of."

Mr. Randall really made that Caddy log, all the way. We didn't have any timing gear or fuel pump trouble and no flats, not in that Caddy. That was a car could make time.

WHEN we got to Bridle Haven, early in the afternoon, Mr. Randall sort of sighed as he looked it over. "I've seen a hundred like it," he said. "Like it, and worse. I'm an old man, Ed."

I couldn't think of anything to say to that.

Then we went over to the grandstand, and there was Endeavor, with that Monk aboard him. Monk was digging him, but Endeavor, I could see, was having one of his bad spells. They were clearing the track, now, so we didn't see him work-out, but I saw Monk lay the bat to him, and Endeavor rear on his hind feet, and paw at the air.

"That's the colt?" Mr. Randall said.

"That's Endeavor."

"Let's go up to the clubhouse and see what's cooking," he said. "I think I know the secretary here."

I sat in the grill and had some flapjacks while Mr. Randall went in to talk to the secretary. When he came out again, he said, "We're in luck, Ed. He's entered this afternoon, and I left the claim there." He shook his head. "This is—kind of irregular, Ed."

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"We lost him in a kind of irregular way, too," I said.

"All right," he said, and sat down. "What's that you're eating?"

He looked at them suspiciously and then looked at the menu, and the girl came over.

"Some toast," he said, "and if you've got the milk in bottles, I'll take a *bottle* of it."

The girl went to get it, and he picked up a glass on the table, and looked at it in the light, and shook his head again.

Endeavor ran fifth in a field of six, that afternoon, just dogging it all the way. It was a two thousand dollar claimer, and that meant Joe and I owed Mr. Randall four thousand dollars, two for one, when we copped the Carlton.

After he picked up the horse, and we had him safe in a stable, I walked back to the Caddy with Mr. Randall.

He sighed, and looked at me. "Ed," he said quietly, "you're on your own. You've decided you're a man, and you are going to play it that way. How you get that colt to the Carlton, and how you find Joe and what you do from here on is going to be your headache. I don't believe in babying a boy as determined as you. If you haven't got the four thousand, after the Carlton, you can come home and work out what you owe me. It's a debt, Ed, I expect to get paid."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I certainly appreciate everything."

"I've made too long a speech already," he said. He took my hand. "Good-bye, Ed, and good luck."

Then he got into the Caddy, and it just boiled, as he gunned it out of there.

I went back to the stable, and Endeavor whinnied at me, and I went over to rub his nose, and I told him, "You're carrying one hell of a load for a two thousand dollar colt. I just hope Joe and me weren't wrong about you."

He stamped his foot and looked proud and snorted. He sure thinks he's something, that Endeavor.

A guy can get by, if he has to. I slept in the stable, and I rode a couple for the gypsies at Bridle Haven, and I saved every dime I could. I couldn't enter Endeavor in anything because he was in Joe's name, but I didn't care about that. Joe was the nominator for the Carlton and that entry still stood.

I worked him out, every morning I wasn't busy working for somebody else, and I let him know who the boss was, you can be sure of that. I didn't let him make any mistakes about that.

And Joe didn't show up.

I bet twice, and won twice, and that helped. I don't know if they were boat races, or not, but that was the rumor and I took the chance. Before I'd met Joe, I wouldn't give you three to five I was alive. I guess Joe taught me a couple bad habits, all right. Jocks can't bet, but the girl at the grill bet for me, and for herself.

I put an ad in the Thoroughbred *Herald:*

Joe:

Don't forget the Carlton. I'll be there, on Endeavor. Be there, Joe.

Ed

If he read anything, wherever he was, it would be the *Herald.* If he was still alive, he'd be reading the *Herald.* That crazy guy, I don't know why he had to act like he did.

In July, I went up to Lyndovia with Endeavor.

This Lyndovia is something different, after Bridle Haven. They've got room for about twenty thousand in the stands, and a fourteen hundred foot stretch, a mile oval really kept up.

You should see the cars and the clothes and the horses at Lyndovia. You can just *feel* the money in that town. If Joe was there, I didn't see him. He didn't come around.

I didn't stay at any of the big hotels; I didn't have that kind of money. I had enough, though, so I didn't have to work while I was there. I could spend my time straightening Endeavor out on the facts of life.

He needed a tightener, but he wasn't going to get it, and I couldn't be sure if he was ready, or not. One day he's full of beans, the next day you'd think he was thirty years old.

I needed Joe, but he didn't come around.

THE morning of the Stakes, I saw that Miss Meredith out at the track. She was sitting in a big convertible with a blond guy who looked like a movie actor. The way he was looking at her, you'd think she was apple pie a la mode.

She saw me, and she saw Endeavor, and

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she frowned. I could feel her eyes on my back as we walked past. I'll bet she couldn't figure this one, not at all.

Maybe, if she was here, Joe was here. But if Joe was here, he'd look me up, if he read the ad. I wanted to turn around, and ask her about Joe, but I didn't. I didn't want to talk to her.

I couldn't eat any lunch. I guess that was the first time in my life I couldn't eat at meal time. My stomach was a knot and my mouth was dry as dust. I hung around the stable, talking to Endeavor.

Any second, I expected to look up and see Joe in the doorway. All I wanted was a word, or a pat on the back, something to let me know I wasn't all alone.

Nobody came. The first races were run, and I was taking Endeavor over to the paddock to saddle him, and it looked like there were a million people there, but none of them was Joe.

Endeavor felt the crowd, all right. I could feel him tremble, and he took on that proud look, and walked like there was electricity in him.

I looked around the crowd at the paddock, and saw Miss Meredith and that blond guy with her, but nobody else I knew. Miss Meredith was chewing her lower lip, like she was worried about something.

Then I heard her calling to me, but I pretended I didn't hear.

Endeavor is looking the other horses over as we're getting ready to go out, and the scorn is in his face.

"Don't be so cocky," I told him. "You'll be lucky if they don't run right over you."

He snorted, and tossed his head. How he loves himself.

In the parade to the post, he decides to take a couple side steps to show his class, and he tosses his head and acts up generally. In a way, I'm glad to see it. At least it makes me think he isn't going to loaf, in this one.

There's Calavar, in this one, and Lady Dill, and Spectrum, all from big stables and all with records any owner can be proud of. There's all these, and more, and then there's the cheap colt under me, and I'm beginning to realize we've got a lot of brass, Joe and me.

I can't do any more than try. I can't do any worse than lose. I patted Endeavor's neck, and said, "This one we've got to have, Ernest."

And he nodded, just like he understood.

We're third from the rail, with Calavar on one side and Needle on the other, and about half the entries are acting up, now.

Endeavor, in his contrary way, is quiet as a statue, all of a sudden. And I tell myself *he's by Trial out of Miss Hopeful, and nobody has to be ashamed of blood like that. He's a lot of colt, but nobody understood him, until Joe and I came along. He's not out of his class.*

THEN, for a second, the field is quiet and the gates open, and we're off.

To the left of us, Calavar just shoots from the gate and he's got half a length on us before I know what's happening. On the other side, Needle is almost a length in front of us as we go past the grandstand.

And ahead of Needle and Calavar, there's Lady Dill and Spectrum, and they all seem to be going away.

I don't have to keep Endeavor in hand; Endeavor is moving along smartly without strain, and I wonder if this is going to be one of his bad days.

We go into the first turn, riding fifth, and a filly is showing to our right, moving up on us. Endeavor puts out a little more, and the filly drops back and back. But the four ahead are running free, and going away.

Any one of those four can cop this one. If I could make a bet right now, I'd bet on one of those four. Because they're moving, making the rest of the field look bad, including Endeavor.

I can't see a chance in this one, not the way those four are traveling. I tried to keep the clock straight in my mind, and tried to believe they're going too fast, too early, that they're burning themselves up, but those are money riders up there; they can't be that dumb.

Into the backstretch, and it looks to me like Lady Dill is fading, because she's getting bigger all the time. Well, at a time like that, a guy sees what he wants to see, and I figure it must be a mistake.

But here's Lady Dill now, faltering near the fence, and Endeavor goes by her without a change in stride. I leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

And Needle, now, getting big, and I

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realize I could be right; these boys can all make mistakes, and today they were making them wholesale. Or maybe Endeavor's running so smooth, I don't realize the time we're making. Endeavor's an easy horse to underestimate.

And now we're past Needle, and in the turn we go past Spectrum, who's folding like an accordion. It must be Endeavor's got a clock in his head, and mine had stopped.

Second, now, so smooth it's hard to believe, coming out of the turn.

But all alone up ahead there's a cloud of dust known as Calavar, one of the top colts in this country, and there's too much ground between us, this late in the race.

That's the way Calavar's owners had played it, running the others into the ground early, knowing the colt's stamina. And it had worked.

Well, second in the Carlton wasn't anything to be ashamed of.

And the screaming from the stands reaches me, because Calavar's a heavy favorite and carrying a load of dough.

Endeavor must hear the screaming, too. Endeavor's sensitive to crowds. He makes the big try, and we're moving. Lordy, how we're moving.

AND we're shortening the gap. That Calavar's getting bigger, or I'm crazy with the excitement. He sure looks bigger, and I know I've never been on a horse that traveled as fast as Endeavor's traveling.

There's the wire, ahead, and the noise is enough to break your eardrums, and I don't lay a finger on Endeavor, because he's all out, he's going to make it or die.

Closer, and the gap still there, but we're moving up, up, up. . . . I'm not breathing, and here's Calavar to our left, straining like he's got the heaves, running his heart out, a great competitive colt.

It's nothing I can believe, even today, with the record there. Endeavor moving by, still going away, winning by a full length, and going away, and I'm crying again like a damned baby.

In the winner's circle, and Endeavor looking bored, again.

And why wasn't Joe here? Where was that crazy guy?

Back to the stables, all alone, Endeavor and me. Endeavor whimpering a little, and nuzzling my cheek, as though trying to tell me it was in the bag, all along.

The stable so quiet and deserted, after I'd walked him around.

And then somebody's in the doorway—Miss Meredith.

"Where's Joe?" she asked. "Where's that sharp laddie?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't seen him for weeks."

"Are you kidding?" she asked me. "Isn't this his colt?"

"It's his," I said. "But Joe left me, after you robbed him in that poker game."

"Don't kid me," she said. "I saw him here, today, looking like a bum. What's the gag?"

Then there was somebody else in the doorway. Joe, and he sure did look like a bum. His face was thin and his eyes kind of bleary, and his clothes something for a hostler.

"Joe—" I said. "Where you been? Didn't you read my ad? Oh, Joe—"

"Ed," he said, "hello. You rode a great race, Ed, for Miss Meredith." He didn't even look at her.

"Miss Meredith—?" I said. "You crazy, Joe? He's *your* colt, Joe. Mr. Randall claimed him for you, and we owe him four grand."

Miss Meredith said, "Joe, honey, where've you been? Do you think it was nice, walking out on me like you did, just because you lost—"

Joe was looking at her, now, and his eyes were dead. "Go some place," he said. "Don't make me forget I was a gentleman, once. Go some place where you're wanted."

She looked at him for a couple of seconds, and she started to say something. Just then, Endeavor whinnied, and if you've ever heard a horse laugh, that's just what it was like. She turned, and walked out.

Joe sat down on a box, and I told him all about it.

When I got through, he just shook his head, and smiled at me. "Oh, Ed," he said. "Ed, you're—well, you're wonderful. Things are going to be different, now. I'll change, Ed. I'll make you proud of me."

"Sure you will," I said.

But I knew he wouldn't. I didn't want him to change. I like Joe just the way he is.

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. . . . . Seemed Like the Engineer Was Annoyed at Whoever Had Left That Truck Stalled on the Right-of-Way

EASTBOUND HOTSHOT

By KEITH EDGAR

WHEN I was a kid in high school they made us read a lot of stuff by some English guy named Shakespeare. Most of it was pretty dull but once in a while he'd toss off a nifty, like in Richard III when the Duke of Clarence says:

"O, I have passed a miserable night,
So full of ugly sights, of ghostly dreams. . . ."

Brother, does that apply to me! Never do I wish another horrible experience like my last trip on the eastbound hotshot. I've

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heard tell that some people consider railroading a humdrum occupation where nothing ever happens. Huh! Let me relate what took place the other night!

It is Sunday evening and I'm over at Peggy McIntosh's house sitting on the verandah with the family and wishing her old man would shut up. Dark-eyed Peggy is my intended missus and I sure hope that she takes after her mother in many ways and not after her father. "Crazy" McIntosh may be the best darned hogger on the whole division, but he's also the meanest, stubbornest, most cantankerous old coot on the system, and that, if you know many railroad engineers, is saying a lot.

Oddly enough, his family thinks that the sun just rises and shines on the horse-faced old stringbean. There he sits, with his feet on the verandah railing, telling lies about the early days of railroading and inferring that the new generation of railroaders—meaning me—are a bunch of sissies. Peggy and her mother are just hanging on his words like he is an oracle or something. It makes me sick. However, things are fairly peaceful until Peggy happens to make a remark about us maybe getting married next year.

"Daughter," says Crazy sorrowfully, "ever since you was so high you been telling your Daddy you're gonna marry a railroad man."

"But," replies Peggy, her lovely dark eyes looking bewildered, "he's a brakeman on the railroad, Daddy."

"Humph," snorts Crazy, eyeing me with disapproval, "that don't make him a railroad man. It takes more than a rule book and a suit of overalls to make a railroader, it does."

Before I can think up a snappy comeback the phone rings, and the sarcastic old buzzard goes in to answer it.

I know by his grunts and groans that he is being ordered out on a run and am thinking happily that this here's one Sunday evening I won't have to put up with him, when I hear him growl in a sort of delighted manner, "Yeah, he's here. Yeah, I'll tell him."

He returns to the verandah and grins at me. "Bub, you're called out on a hot-shot and you just got an hour to git ready."

"Who's the engineer?" I ask, suspiciously.

"Me," leers Crazy, confirming my worst fears.

"My," smiles Peggy, "isn't it nice that you two can get the same trip now and then?"

BEING a born diplomat, I make no comment, but take a hasty leave to go home and change into my overalls and pack my basket. I hurry down to the yard office and sign out, then hunt up our caboose. Putting my basket away and digging some fusees and torpedoes out of the locker, I'm lighting my lantern when Graveyard—Gorman, the conductor, comes in with Jonesy our rear-end brakeman. Graveyard is a dismal stoop-shouldered character who ain't never had an optimistic thought in his life. They call his caboose "The Hearse."

He sighs dolefully and says, "Are you a good jumper, Bub?"

"Huh?" I asks.

"Son," advises Graveyard, "if I was riding with Crazy McIntosh, I would keep myself ready to bail out in a hurry. Some night he is going to kill us all with his glory-driving."

"For the love of Pete!" I protests. "Crazy's been wheeling engines since before I was born and he ain't had a wreck yet. Just because he's the fastest hogger on the high-iron—" Then I realize that I am defending the old ache-and-pain and close my trap. I borrow a smoke from Jonesy and walk up to the depot. Our engine is 2458, a big hand-fired brute with plenty of power and a nice turn of speed. And there is Crazy, his bony frame draped in clean overalls, denim cap on backwards and goggles shoved up on his forehead holding a torch in one hand and a long-spouted oilcan in the other, grumpily inspecting the engine. A lugubrious expression occupies his gaunt face, one cheek of which is bulging with McAndrew's Plug (a strong chew for strong men), as he prods and pokes among the drivers looking for some bearing the hostlers might have missed.

He sees me, straightens, shifts his quid, expectorates disgustedly and bends over the drivers again.

Me, I ignore him and climb up into the cab to stow my fusees. The fireman, Dirty Dolan, is laying his fire and he don't even

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look up to greet me. I ain't hurt, however, as Dolan don't know no better, being just as dumb as he looks. The big ox, with his placid bovine face and huge shoulders, has just one good quality—he can fire a hog to suit Crazy. Also, being the silent type he gets along with the old wart.

CRAZY swings up into the cab, takes a gander at the steam gauge, and plunks himself on the seat just as the manifest, with Dusty Smith at the throttle, rolls in from Detroit right on her time. I forgot to mention that our train, number 92, is a redball. This means that she consists mostly of valuable merchandise and runs on a time-card like a passenger train. Tonight 92 has about sixty loads and ten empties. Well, anyway, the other engine cuts off and trundles over to the roundhouse. We back down to the train and I couple on. At the same time a switch engine is putting our caboose on the rear end.

Crazy is testing the air when Graveyard bustles over with our orders. He hands up the flimsies and hollers, "We're running 'extra'!"

Crazy leans out the cab window and asks politely, "What the hell's the idea?"

Graveyard shakes his head sadly. "There's been some robberies over on the Central. Cars was looted when they stopped in sidings. So the dispatcher ain't taking no chances with this train. You're pushing right through with a clear track."

Dirty Dolan is already going out the catwalk to put the white flags in their sockets by the headlight, denoting we are running extra; but looking down at Graveyard, I can tell he's kinda wishing he'd stayed home.

You see, releasing Crazy McIntosh from the time-card also releases him from what he considers a lot of restraint. When he hits the high-iron he don't like to stop to count the ties. It makes for an exciting ride.

Crazy tests the air again, looks at his watch, then glances down at Graveyard still fussing around with his lantern. He hollers kindly, "Listen, you old bonebag, if you wanna ride this here train you better get the hell back to the Hearse."

"Don't you worry about me, dang ya!" shrills Graveyard. "High-ball!" Then he turns and hot-foots it along the train as fast as he can travel. He's made many a trip with Crazy and knows what to expect.

Crazy grins sourly, stands up, swings the Johnson bar back into reverse, jerks the whistle cord three times and yanks on the sand, whoops the whistle twice and eases open the throttle. Old 2458 snorts, belches, and heaves herself back against the train, piling several car-lengths of slack into it before she stops.

Crazy throws the Johnson bar forward, turns on the sand, whoops the whistle twice and eases open the throttle. The big hog slides forward, bellows heavily. As the slack pulls out of the train, her drivers start to slip. Crazy eases off on the throttle, gives her more sand, then more steam. 2458 lunges ahead like a willing horse, takes up the load, and, her exhaust thundering mightily, we start to roll.

I look back in time to see Graveyard's lantern going up the side of a boxcar. He ain't taking no chances on catching the caboose as it goes by. Crazy sees it too and brays gleefully, the mean old mule. This is a favorite stunt of his, making the conductor walk over the top of the train. It just shows you what kind of character he is.

As soon as the whole train is rolling Crazy hooks up the Johnson bar a little, shortening the valve stroke, and as we clear the yards our exhaust has sharpened to a quick hammering.

Crazy expells his quid at a crossing sign, fumbles in the pocket of his overalls, digs out a ratty plug of McAndrews, bites off a fresh chew and rolls the nasty stuff into his leathery cheek. Then he settles back, pulls down his goggles, glances at the water gauge, hollers, "Hey Dolan, give me a low glass!" and hooks the Johnson bar up some more. The beat of our exhaust quickens perceptibly. He leans out the cab window, wiggles his bottom into a comfortable position and notches the throttle back.

I climb onto my seat on the opposite side of the cab and watch Dirty Dolan stoking the old girl. He is swinging with an easy motion, timing his stroke exactly so that his big foot presses the compressed-air treadle just at the right instant to open the fire-doors as the scoop hits them, letting the minimum amount of cold air into the fire-box.

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By the time we clear the junction our Johnson bar is riding in the company notch, the throttle arm is at the back of the quadrant, and old 2458 is thudding fast and furious like the hoofbeats of a galloping horse. I love these night runs, with the exhaust pounding in racy rhythm and the engine rocking and pitching in time to it, with the hiss of the compressed-air treadle and the clang of the coal scoop making accompaniment as Dirty Dolan keeps her hot. There is the stirring smell of hot iron and steam, the feel of tremendous power under you, and the constant thrill of trying to beat the clock. It just gets into your blood—that's all.

OUR headlight bores a brilliant path through the dark, the telegraph poles slip by like ghostly pickets and the scream of our whistle splits the night apart as we thunder down on Aylmer with the order board on the green and the westbound in the hole to give us clearance.

We cannonball over the trestle at Tillsonburg and hit the long curve through Courtland. Crazy has been shifting the Johnson bar a notch this way and that, experimenting to get the best possible performance out of the engine, so that when we high-wheel onto the straightaway old 2458 is really wrapping her stack and running all out.

I look across the cab at Crazy McIntosh hunched over in his seat, one hand gripping the throttle, head and shoulders leaning out into the night, quid moving thoughtfully up and down in his cheek, peering steadily through his goggles at the track ahead. Just another engineer, you might say, doing a job of driving an engine. But somehow he always seems to drive them a little faster than the other hoggers, and so they call the guy "Crazy" and prophesy a bad end for him. They've been prophesying like that for a long time.

Well, anyway, there I am, practically thinking kind thoughts about Peggy's bad-tempered old man, swaying with the pitch of the engine and keeping a general eye on things. We are highballing along a lonely stretch of track which runs through farmland west of Simcoe. The big hog banks into a curve, and as I'm on the inside of that curve it is my job to watch the roadbed because the engineer can't see around the long boiler.

I take one horrified look and yell, *"SOAK HER!"* An old jalopy of a truck is parked square on the crossing of a little side-road. In the glare of our headlight I can see quite plain that the cab of the truck is empty.

Crazy don't hesitate. He gives her the air, he gives her the sand, and he slams the throttle shut.

I am remembering Graveyard's advice about bailing out and I dive for the gangway to join the birds, but we are still travelling at a devil of a clip, even with the air in the big hole and the brakeshoes screaming all along the train.

Now Crazy can see the truck and note the fact that it is empty, so he releases the air and guns the throttle. Being on a curve like we are with brakes locked, the impact might easily derail our engine, particularly if some metal gets under our wheels. He tries to avert this danger by hitting the truck hard enough to toss it clear of the track. But there's still a chance of derailment, so I scramble up over the coal in the tender and roll onto the water tank just as we hit.

There's a metallic crash and pieces of truck go whizzing in all directions. Then Crazy throws on the air again and we squeal to a stop. By the stream of purple language pouring out of the cab I can tell our engineer is annoyed at whoever left that truck stalled on the right-of-way.

I GET to my feet and draw a deep breath, and suddenly I am aware that it is awful quiet around here. Crazy has stopped swearing. I don't hear nothing but the hiss of steam and the soft thump of the air pumps. Curious, I look over the headed-up coal down into the cab—and so help me, I see *four* men there! And they are all in kinda odd poses. Dirty Dolan is standing dumbly with both hands up in the air, still holding the coal scoop in one mitt. Crazy McIntosh is gripping the edge of his seat, cheek bulging with his quid, and staring in pop-eyed anger at two galoots who are waving guns around.

It's a stick-up!

Being naturally a quick thinker, I realize what has happened. These crooks have parked their truck across the track to make

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us stop so's they can rob the train. What a low-down trick!

Now, personally I am as brave as a lion, and besides they can't see me. To think is to act with yours truly, so I grab some lumps of coal and start throwing.

Unfortunately due to the darkness, my aim is a bit off and the first hunk bashes Crazy McIntosh on the side of the head, the second piece shattering on the fire-box.

The two gunmen are startled and whirl around. Dirty Dolan brings down the hand holding the scoop and whangs one of them over the head. He drops like a ninepin. At the same time, groggy but game, Crazy McIntosh kicks the other in the gizzard and squirts tobacco juice in his eyes, disconcerting him somewhat. Dolan administers the coup de grace with his shovel. So there they are, cold as iced herrings.

Seeing as how I am a hero, I can almost hear those wedding bells ring as I slide down into the cab again. To my surprise, Crazy snatches the coal scoop from Dirty Dolan and takes a swipe at me.

"Ya cussword idiot!" he screeches. "Tryin' to kill me, was ya? Jumpin' at the chance to murder me, was ya?" I duck fast and scramble back up to the tender. Imagine my hurt astonishment! Just because my aim was a bit faulty, he's got to get all riled up! The old stinker is still screaming, "Come down here, ya cussword murderer, so's I kin beat yer cussword head in!" and I am hastily trying to explain that it was a pure accident, when one of the hold-up guys groans and tries to get to his feet. Crazy pauses in his tirade to bop him again with the scoop, so I point out that we'd better fix them monkeys and get on our way.

Crazy grudgingly agrees, but is still eyeing me balefully while I help Dirty Dolan truss the crooks with bell-cord. Crazy tosses their guns in the locker under his seat, and when Dolan closes the firedoors which have been opened to prevent the hog from popping her safety valve, he whoops the whistle and goes through a whole lot of the motions of starting.

But the locomotive won't steam. Crazy looks baffled. He jumps down off his seat, grabs the torch, a long brass tube with an inch-thick oil-soaked wick, ignites it in the firebox, and disappears out along the catwalk. In a minute he reappears, preceded by a thick fog of profanity, and whistles for the rear-end brakeman to protect the train. Then he snatches a hammer from the locker, hollers for Dolan to follow him, and drops to the ground. I get my lantern and trail after them, first checking the orders to make sure there is no westbound due along to complicate things.

WHEN I get up to the front of the engine they are standing on the pilot examining the smoke-box doors, and for once, Crazy ain't swearing. I inquire what is the trouble and Crazy tells me mildly that some heavy part of the truck has cracked the smoke-box door, letting cold air into the front end and killing the suction, which is why the engine won't steam. Meanwhile, Dirty Dolan is beating back the dogs with the hammer, and when he swings open the smoke-box door a hunk of it falls right off. I expect Crazy McIntosh to blow his top again, but he calmly raises his torch and peers into the front end.

Suddenly he turns and yells down at me, "Hey, Bub! Git me a saw!"

"A saw?" I inquire.

"Yeah, a saw," nods Crazy, "and some boards."

"What do you want them for?" I asks, naturally dumfounded at such a request. Here we are with a broken-down engine in the middle of nowhere and he wants to do some carpentry work. I am bewildered.

Crazy jumps down off the pilot and, waving the torch, shoves his ugly face close to me. In the flickering smoky light he looks like one of them gargoyles. "Ya knock-kneed hunk of misery!" he hollers, "All I want is a saw and some boards! Now do I get them or do I wring yer scrawny neck here and now?"

"Oh, well," I says, retiring hastily, "if you want them real bad I'll see what I can do." As I hurry back along the train toward the caboose, I hear him telling Dolan to return to the cab and sit on our two prisoners.

It is a beautiful night, with the moon scudding past some clouds high overhead and a breeze moaning sadly through a clump of pines by the right-of-way. I'm moseying along the roadbed and thinking romantic thoughts of Peggy, when all of a sudden I

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hear cautious footsteps in the cinders on the other side of the train.

I'm about twenty-five cars back from the engine, and all alone, so these footsteps sound mighty suspicious to me. I douse my lantern and squirrel up the grab-irons on the nearest boxcar. Lying flat on the roof, I listen intently. Sure enough, I hear the soft crunch of someone pussyfooting along the cinders. I then realize that maybe we didn't get *all* the robbers. Just as I come to this conclusion, the footsteps pause below—and I hear someone climbing the ladder!

Leaning over and looking cautiously down, I see his dark bulk coming right up at me.

Well, I'm a man who acts fast in a crisis, and I reach over and clout him with my lantern.

There is a *"Klonk!"*, a startled bellow of anguish and fear, and a thud, as Graveyard Gorman tumbles down to the roadbed. Cripes! I've clubbed my own conductor!

Before I can collect my thoughts, Graveyard staggers to his feet and runs off into the darkness as if the devil was after him with a pitchfork. I sit there on top of that boxcar and consider my predicament. It ain't good.

Of course, what has happened is easy to figure. Graveyard heard *me*, and being a nervous type, decides to climb a car to reconnoitre, just as I did. Right now he thinks it is train-robbers who hit him, but it won't take him long to figure out there's no robbers around loose, and that it must have been me.

Which means that if I go back to the caboose he'll beat my brains out.

And if I don't get Crazy McIntosh his carpentry tools, *he* will beat my brains out.

I am in a mess.

I sigh heavily and look around. Right then I get an inspiration. About a hundred yards off the right-of-way is the dark shape of a farm-house and a barn. Maybe I can borrow a saw and some boards from the farmer without disturbing Graveyard, who probably has a headache anyway.

I swing down to the roadbed and cross the ditch to a cornfield. My lantern won't light so I have to fumble through the darkness to the farmyard, and believe me I am careful. I once had a nasty experience with a farmer's dog which I don't wish to repeat. However, I reach the farmyard without rousing the mutt and am about to knock on the door when in the moonlight I see a bucksaw leaning against a woodpile. There don't seem to be no point in waking the household and getting involved in a lot of explanations, so I pick up the saw and carefully retrace my path to the right-of-way. There aren't any boards lying handy and it's a cinch the farmer won't let me pull some off his barn.

However, when I return to the engine, Crazy has collected a lot of boards and stuff from the wreckage of the truck and he seems satisfied with the bucksaw. He calls Dolan down and we go to work building a sort of jerry-door in the smoke-box opening. I am just coming to the conclusion that this ain't going to do much good because the boards, being scrap lumber, don't fit together very well, when Crazy hollers at me, "Bub, we got to have a blanket! Go back to the Hearse and git a blanket!"

I open my mouth to ask him what for, but he glares at me and kinda fingers the lump on the side of his face—and it ain't McAndrew's plug. So I restrain my curiosity and hurry off on my errand. It seems to me I am becoming a regular Marathon walker.

ALL at once I stop and remember that my lantern's broken. Now, it is against the rules for a brakeman to go anywhere at night without a lamp, and with Graveyard in a bad mood anyway. I don't want to give him no chance to throw the Company Bible in my face and get me suspended. So I climb into the cab after a couple of fusees, figuring I can ignite one of them when I get near the caboose and so have an appearance of obeying the book. I am surprised to see no sign of the robbers in the cab, and naturally I call down to Crazy and mention the fact.

Crazy comes dancing up alongside the cab a-waving his torch and screeching at me most horribly. "Ya cussword dude-wrangler! Didn't I tell ya to git me a cussword blanket? Why are ya loafing around up there, ya cussword stargazer?"

Me, I am indignant. I tells him I had to have a fusee and that furthermore the crooks has escaped.

Crazy glares up at me, and in the torch-

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light he sure is an awful sight with his ugly goatish face all grimed with coal and soot. He draws a deep breath and says pleadingly. "Lissen, Bub, we packed them yuks in the big tool-box on the water tank. They's locked in nice and safe. Now lissen, Bub, if I was to beg you on me bended knees, would you kindly git me a blanket from the crummy?"

"Oh, well," I says magnanimously, "if you put it that way, I'll do the best I can." Crazy swallows kinda hard, so just to play safe I descend on the other side and hot-foot back along the train.

About forty cars from the engine I suddenly notice a shadow skulking a dozen yards or so beyond me. Then the shadow disappears—up into a boxcar!

I pause to figure this out. Then I see it all. Graveyard has realized it is me who crowned him and he is laying in wait. He is going to jump me as I trudge unsuspectingly past that there boxcar.

Well, Graveyard may think he's pretty smart, but I'm not so dumb, either. Quick as a flash, I run up alongside the car and heave the door shut. It is the work of an instant for me to throw the hasp over the staple and ram in the spike of a fusee to hold it. Now, ten men couldn't break out of that car—unless the door on the other side is open, too. I hold my breath, but from the muffled roar and pounding I conclude that the far door is closed tight, so I proceed on my way with light heart. When I arrive at the caboose I can see the flicker of a red fusee away down the line where Jonesy is out protecting the train. I appropriate a couple of blankets and a fresh lantern and hurry toward the front end.

As I pass the boxcar which I have turned into my own private prison, I feel a pang of remorse. I really shouldn't treat my conductor like this, but, however, if I let him out now Graveyard is going to be pretty nasty about everything and will maybe want to argue, and we can't afford any more delays.

Since I had gone back on the opposite side of the train, I didn't see the farmhouse, but now I notice the house is all lit up and there seems to be a bit of excitement around. Me, I don't tarry. I don't want no angry farmer questioning me about his stolen bucksaw.

Crazy is yammering with impatience. He snatches the blankets from me without even a "thank you" and in about ten shakes the engine is repaired. He nails one blanket over the wooden jerry-door, then slams the smoke-door shut on it and hammers home the dogs. This makes an almost air-tight front end. But to be certain he jams the second blanket into the broken section until everything is snug.

Screeching at me to collect the tools and at Dolan to stir up the fire, he clambers into the cab and whistles in the rear flag. Then he cautiously starts the hog and sure enough it steams and after a few minutes of bucking slack into the train and a couple of false starts we get under way. I look back and catch a highball from the rear end denoting Jonesy is aboard, and collapse on my seat.

By the time we rattle through Nixon and hit the long grade down into Simcoe, things have settled almost to normal. The hog doesn't steam with her old vim and vigor, but she hauls the train and we can congratulate ourselves on having done a darn good job of repairing a breakdown.

Me, I am worried about Graveyard. I am in a quandry. Naturally, Jonesy don't miss our conductor because he figures Graveyard has gone up to the head end to investigate the breakdown and is riding with us—which he ain't. But we'll stop at Simcoe to turn our prisoners over to the police and report to the dispatcher. And there's going to be some eyebrows raised when our conductor turns up missing.

So what am I going to do? Am I going to just leave him in that boxcar and let the poor old droop starve to death? Or am I going to release Graveyard and probably get myself fired for assaulting my conductor? Besides which Graveyard will undoubtedly assault me personally.

I AM brooding about this when Crazy McIntosh calls me over to his side of the cab. He smiles kindly and says, "Bub, you sure kin act fast in an emergency, hey?" Realizing that he is referring to my heroic aid in capturing the crooks, I say modestly, "Oh, it weren't nothing."

"Bub," grins Crazy, "you was on the baseball team, wasn't you? You was their star pitcher, wasn't you?"

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I nods proudly.

"Then," snarls Crazy, feeling the lump on his cheek tenderly, "you deliberately bashed me with that hunk of coal! Don't try to deny it!" His voice rises shrilly. "Damya, Bub, if I ever ketch ya messing around my daughter again I'm gonna slaughter ya with me bare hands!"

Sometimes life just don't seem worth living.

What with one thing and another you can understand how I am in a very upset condition when we drift down into Simcoe and Crazy spots the engine to a stop in front of the depot. And there I get the worst shock of my life. I think I see a ghost!

Standing under the lights on the depot platform is a bunch of people including half a dozen cops. But—and my eyes nearly fall out of my head—hopping around in front of this group and watching us pull in is none other than Graveyard Gorman! He looks a bit battered and bruised and his noggin is covered with a bandage as big as a turban. He is holding a shotgun.

I am done for! Somehow, Graveyard has escaped from the boxcar and gone across country to the highway and called the cops. My goose is cooked to a turn.

Me, I dive for the opposite side of the cab to make a desperate break for freedom, but that side is also being covered by some armed citizens and a couple of cops. I am trapped.

Well, the cops pile up into the cab and I decide to surrender meekly, but to my surprise they don't pay no attention to me. There is a lot of hollering back and forth between them and Crazy McIntosh and he leads them onto the tender to haul the crooks out of the big tool-box. They are a sorry sight and there is no fight left in them. Crazy digs their guns out of the locker under his seat and hands the weapons to the cops and we all descend to the platform, yours truly somewhat dazed by the turn of events, but realizing that through some miracle Graveyard hasn't got around to suspecting me yet.

In the general whoo-de-do Crazy manages to tell his tale with great emphasis on his own heroism, the faker. He don't mention how it is strictly due to my bravery that we captured them monkeys, or how it was with my help he repaired the engine. Then Crazy peers at Graveyard and says kinda surprised, "Hey, you old bonebag, what are *you* doing here? And what happened to that there dome of yours?"

Graveyard is so excited and bustling with importance he can hardly gabble his story. It seems that when he was conked on the head by persons unknown, he hustles back towards his caboose. Suddenly he hears sounds of people breaking into a boxcar. With great presence of mind he deduces the train is being robbed, so kites across some fields to a farmhouse, wakes up the occupants and phones for the police. By the time the cops have arrived, our train is gone. *But* they find a big ten-ton truck parked in some bushes near the right-of-way and it is half loaded with stolen merchandise from our train!

A big policeman interrupts him at this point. "What we can't understand," says the cop in a puzzled manner, "is where the rest of the gang disappeared, and why they abandoned their loot. Also, you'd think when you started to move off they would cut the air hose and delay the train until they'd finished loading."

My knees are knocking strangely, but I take a deep breath. "They couldn't do that," I says, "because I locked them in a boxcar."

"You *what?*" yelps Crazy, incredulous.

"Shucks," I say matter-of-factly, "they was robbing the train so I had to do something. See as how you wanted that blanket in a hurry, I locked them in a boxcar for the time being. It's about forty cars back, with a fusee sticking in the lock."

The police and the citizens all rush off to take this matter in hand, while Graveyard trots into the operator's office to call the dispatcher, leaving Crazy McIntosh and Dirty Dolan staring at me.

Crazy is feeling the lump on his cheek gingerly and I can see he is struggling with his worst nature. Finally he shakes his head grudgingly.

"Bub," he says with a sour grin, "Peggy and my missus are gonna be mighty proud of us, ain't they? They ought to cook us a big chicken dinner for this, eh, Bub?"

Oh, well, maybe he ain't such a bad guy after all.

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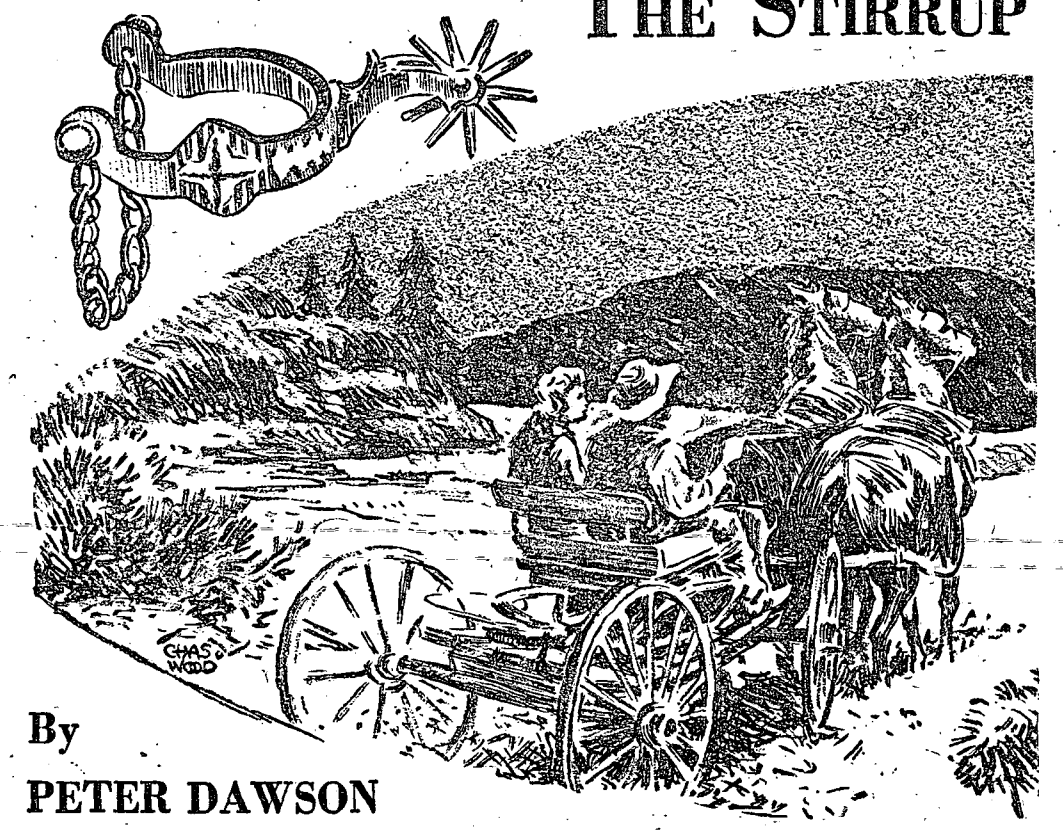
THE STIRRUP



By

PETER DAWSON

THE STORY SO FAR

IN THE days of old John Vance, the Stirrup brand had been famous in the Lodgepole country. Vance's rival had been Jim Kirby, and after Vance's death, Kirby had seen what a weakling was Milt Hurd, who had married Vance's widow. He now saw his chance to take over the Stirrup spread on a lease, with option to buy, and was high handedly planning to do so. Kirby had left out of his scheme of things, Fred Vance, old John's son who had left home years before, but Fred, too, had to be a signatory of the lease.

He returns from New Mexico, prepared to sign, but Kirby arouses his antagonism and he announces he will not back up his stepfather's promise of a lease, but will stay on and bring back the Stirrup holdings to their old prosperity. He looks up an old employe of his father's, Josh Hawks, to back him in the venture, and promises to help out with a grazing lease, Tom Demmler, a rancher in love with Rita Kirby, Jim's daughter. Demmler is apparently grateful and straightforward, but a man of mystery nevertheless.

Then Milt Hurd is killed and Fred Vance is arrested for the job by Sheriff Ben, a Kirby man. Fred asks Tom Demmler to round up some men to hold the Stirrup against Kirby until he is out of jail and Demmler's facility in rounding up some tough characters, shows a knowledge of them which Fred does not suspect.

Kirby visits Fred in jail and threatens delay in his trial if Fred won't make a deal for the Stirrup. Fred refuses and breaks jail.

II (*Continued*)

THE group of tough men arranged for by Tom Demming had been waiting at the edge of the timber above Stirrup for almost an hour, their horses tied well back out of sight; and now as the

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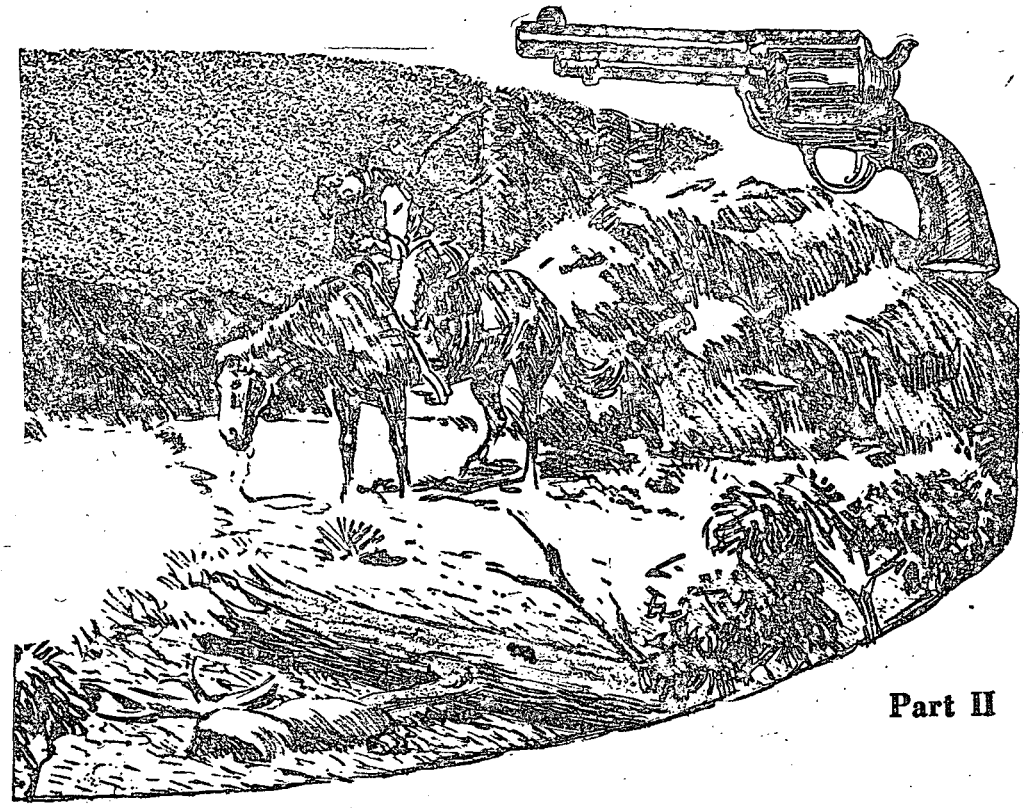
Boss



Part II

Fred Vance Says He'll Stay on Stirrup, No Matter What!

night crowded out the last of the twilight and the stars came agleam, Jeff Spane said, "Let's move."

They mounted and started down across the long meadow toward the distant black shadow of the cottonwoods, Spane taking his time, riding straight for the winking lights of the crew-quarters windows. After several minutes they could see the faint glow of another light under the trees and as they rode down behind the corral Spane said, "Chuck, go look the house over." The man to his right started cutting obliquely away as Spane added, "Remember, no gun play."

They had talked it over prettly thoroughly up there in the timber while they waited for the darkness and now the third man, Byars, swung to the far side of the corral as Spane kept straight on. Byars knew his way about the place and would go in through the cook's lean-to, bringing the cook along if there was one.

All this careful preparation was unnecessary as it turned out. A man sauntered to the bunkhouse door and glanced idly into the night as Spane was coming quietly around out front. But then Spane saw him turn back into the room and sit on the end bench of the table, and as Spane was walking in on the door the man reached for a platter and helped himself to some meat. They were just beginning the evening meal after working late. This was fine. They would all be there.

Spane simply stepped into the doorway with his Colt in hand and lined it at the table. "Don't anyone move!" he drawled and it was over. Except for Bill Childers.

When he heard that voice, Childers' head rose. He laid down knife and fork, staring at Spane over the length of the table. There were three men sitting with him, counting Zinn, the carpenter, and each of them now looked from Spane to Childers.

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He said mildly, "No one ever had to use a gun to get a meal off Box, Spane. Sit down."

He heard a sound coming from the kitchen behind him then and turned. Byars was roughly pushing the cook in through the door.

Childers knew now that this was real trouble. He was even more sure of it several seconds later when Chuck came in the door behind Spane, saying, "No one up there, Jeff. So we got 'em all."

Spane nodded, still looking at Box's wagon boss. "I heard you boys were on the way out, Bill. How come you haven't left yet?"

The cook made his mistake just then, thinking they'd forgotten him. He lunged for the kitchen door and Byars swung sharply, striking with his gun. The blow caught the cook on the side of the head and his heavy frame went slack, crumpling to the floor.

Childers saw the last of it and was rising up off the bench when Spane called sharply, "I wouldn't, Bill!" to turn him rigid as he was wheeling around.

"Better go over 'em."

Spane had no sooner spoken than Chuck came across and started circling the table. He took Ed Foster's Navy Colts, searched Zinn for a weapon he never carried, found nothing on Red Durns, the one who had so far neither moved nor spoken. And he was careful coming in behind Childers to lift the .44 from his thigh. The cook was moaning softly now, a line of scarlet glistening from his scalp down to the floor.

"Okay, boys—" Spane's tone was amused. "Vance says you leave. So out you go. All but Bill."

None of them moved. Childers abruptly asked, "How would you know what Fred Vance says, Spane?"

"Didn't I tell you? I work for him now."

Childers' expression was one of utter contempt. "Scum like you workin' for Vance?" He shook his head.

Spane's face darkened. He said tonelessly, "You wait, Bill! Just wait." Then he came in behind Foster, lifted a boot, planted it to shove him toward the door. "Out!"

They obeyed then, Zinn reaching his hat off his bunk, Foster and Red going out bareheaded. Chuck, their guns slung by the trigger-guards in his left hand, was following when Spane told him, "Take 'em as far as the fence."

When Spane and Childers and Byars were alone, Spane nodded to the cook. "Drag him out and have the others take him along."

Byars got a hold on the unconscious man and pulled him out through the kitchen, Childers watching with a growing feeling of uneasiness and dread. He had never had any illusions as to the breed of man Jeff Spane was; he had none now.

Finally his feelings crowded him into asking, "Now what?"

"You'll see. We been a long time gettin' around to this."

Childers wanted to get it over with, whatever it was to be. He came around the table until he stood in front of Spane. His pale eyes showed his contempt, his loathing of the man. The door to the kitchen creaked shut now and Spane's glance went that way briefly. Then he was drawling:

"You know what to do, Byars."

Childers heard the man closing in behind him. His thought of moving came a fraction of a second too late. For as his body swayed forward with the thought Byars' arms closed around him. He thrashed and kicked; but the other was strong and had spread his boots wide.

Deliberately, Spane thrust his Colt into its scabbard. Then just as deliberately he drew back his right fist and threw it at Bill Childers' face.

The blow was a glancing one on the mouth, nearly a miss. And as Childers licked the blood from his lips he said quietly, "Make a good job of it, Spane. Because if you don't you're dead!"

"That was for the time you invited me away from Yount's poker layout in town, Bill. Remember? You'd never sat with a rustler, you said." Spane laughed brittlely. "Now this'll be for those three days you kept me locked up while you followed that bunch of steers you never found."

He was smiling wickedly now as he feinted with his left. Childers ducked straight into his hard right. Childers head snapped back and before it had rocked down Spane hit him again, and still again, standing crouched and his sloping shoulders rounded, grunting as he moved. His thin face was patterned with viciousness and his eyes showed a

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gloating as he swung once more on the helpless Box man he had so long feared and hated.

Childers was feeling nothing now, the last hard blow on the jaw-hinge having almost knocked him out. He was weak, sagging against Byars' hold and when Byars dropped him suddenly he fell face down, his smashed nose hitting the floor hard to bring on a new wave of pain.

That pain was what brought him around, cleared his senses so that he could make out voices. One was Spane's, the other a familiar one but not belonging there. He got a forearm under his face finally and propped his head up and opened his eyes.

Byars' boots were planted there close to his face and he could see the Colt that hung in the man's hand. Beyond, Spane was some eight feet away and facing the door. And in the doorway stood a high shape Childers had trouble recognizing because the lamplight didn't reach quite that far.

But finally he knew that it was Fred Vance.

The next moment Vance was coming into the room, Spane backing slowly away from him and his hand warily lifting toward the gun at his thigh. Childers was noticing that Vance was unarmed as Vance looked down at him, saying tonelessly, "No one said you were to beat anyone half to death."

"Play it rough, Demmler said. That's what I'm doin'."

Bill Childers noticed the cold angry way Vance's glance lifted to Spane now. "You tak orders from me, Spane. Get this man onto a bed and do something for him."

"Like hell!" Spane drawled. "This is something I've had coming to me for years. So keep out of it." He backed another step toward Childers. "Byars, keep your iron on him while I finish this. We don't even know he is this Vance."

He turned then and reached down to take Childers by the hair and roughly lift his head. And as the room rocked before Childers' eyes he saw Fred Vance lazily reach up to push his wide hat onto the back of his head in a baffled, angry way.

Childers was thinking groggily, *All he can do is stand there and watch*, when suddenly Vance whipped off his hat and threw it at the lamp.

In that second before the lamp crashed to its side, Spane sensed something and let go his hold on Childers, wheeling around. And as the room went all at once pitch-black Childers used every ounce of his feeble strength striking out at Byars' lifting gun-arm.

III

CHILDERS' fist struck Byars' arm a glancing blow at the instant the man's .45 laid its deafening blast along the room. That hard-reaching thrust carried Childers forward and into Spane's legs and Spane fell cartwheeling backward over the Box foreman as the thud of Byars' dropping gun sounded. There came the quick scuffling of boots, the solid strike of a fist and the sound of labored breathing close ahead as Childers dragged his weight around and threw himself chest-down on Spane.

Somehow he managed to get a hold, to pin Spane's arms to his sides, and as they rolled out across the floor Childers heard steps pounding toward the door. A moment later there came the crunch of boots against the gravelly soil outside and he knew that Byars had gone.

Spane was cursing, struggling in panic and finally lifted a knee hard into Childers' groin. The pain paralyzed the Box man an instant and Spane tore free, got to his knees and lunged away.

Childers lay there trying to get his breath, gagging at the strong taint of coal-oil in the air and looking toward Spane silhouetted against the doorway. He saw Vance's high shape suddenly appear framed against the starlit opening, moving in on Spane. Vance must have sensed his quarry standing close then, for he planted his legs wide and threw a vicious swinging blow that caught Spane on the arm and staggered him across so that he was briefly targeted before the door. Now that he could see his man Vance stabbed out with his left. Spane took the blow in the chest and staggered out of Childers' sight toward the table. One of the benches there fell heavily on its side and there came the sound of the table skidding and banging against the bunks. Vance lunged into that pitch-blackness and a moment later Spane grunted in pain and Childers could hear Vance's labored, gusty breathing and the sound of several thudding blows. Then

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abruptly Spane's thin shape moved into sight again.

He was running, trying to make the door. He was almost to it when the small bench used at the near end of the table sailed out of the darkness to catch him squarely in the small of the back. He cried out hoarsely in agony and sprawled headlong through the door. Childers saw him scramble to his feet and hurriedly limp away.

A moment later Vance's voice came out of the darkness, halting, labored. "You all right, Bill?"

Childers had a hard time speaking and mumbled, "Go—after him!"

"Let him go," Vance drawled. "We'll sit tight till they've cleared out."

His step sounded close by and Childers wanted to speak, to urge him to finish what he started; but the effort seemed too great, so Childers lay as he was, shortly sensing that Vance was groping around in the dark trying to locate him.

"Just take it easy," Vance said from alongside. "Listen."

Childers caught the rapid hoof-falls of a pair of horses and, though it galled him to think Spane was getting away, he felt a contrary relief as the excitement drained out of him.

"They won't be back." Vance went to the door and closed it and over the next half minute Childers could hear him moving between the windows by the bunks. Suddenly a match's flare laid a wan, flickering light across the room and Childers could see Vance standing there looking down at him.

Blankets were hung over the windows. The heavy table sat crookedly, tilted against the double bunks along the inside wall. Close by an overturned chair, a glass-littered puddle of coal-oil stained the floor and now Vance stepped over there to pick up the unbroken base of the lamp. There was still some oil in it and with a second match he lit the wick, righted the table and set the lamp on it.

Just then Childers saw the cedar handle of Byars' Colt sticking out above Vance's belt and the thought of how thoroughly the big man had turned the tables on Spane struck him as funny and he tried to laugh. But instead of laughing he caught his breath and choked back a cry against the pain in his mouth. Something was wrong with his jaw, his tongue was caught on a tooth, half-bitten through, and his low whimper brought Vance across and kneeling beside him.

"Better let me get you to bed, fella."

Childers was remembering now what they had done to him. He sat up and as Vance tried to help he pushed him away. With a vast effort he got to his feet and started for the door.

"Where to?" Vance drawled.

"Home."

"Better wait till morning."

Childers shook his head so violently that it unsteadied him and he lurched into the wall.

"Let's fix up your face first," Vance said.

"No."

"Can you stay on your hull?"

Childers nodded as he tried to pull the door open. Behind him Vance blew out the smoking lamp, then came to the door and opened it. He held Childers' arm as they went out. Childers trudged over to the bench by the wall, got the dipper from the water bucket there and drank. The water's chill eased the pain of his mouth and he emptied the dipper slowly, relishing it, feeling his numbed senses clearing a little.

Presently they started on again, heading for the corral. Halfway there Childers asked, "What you comin' along for?"

"To see you get there."

Childers stopped, facing Vance in sudden anger. "I can—" he had said that much before his hand lifted to his hurt mouth; then he added with a quick intake of breath—"can make it on my own."

Vance smiled meagerly. "Sure you can. But I want to go along. It's a nice night for a ride."

Childers' anger was short-lived. He was feeling oddly grateful at the prospect of company over this long ride and a contrary friendliness toward this man whose very name had before now aroused nothing but dislike in him. There was something he wanted to say to Vance but he couldn't quite get it straight what it was. So now he simply turned away and stumbled on across toward the barn-lot.

HE WAS clumsy with the saddle and Vance helped. Since Childers' animal was alone in the corral they left the gate

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open and Vance walked on up to get his horse from the deep shadows between wagon-shed and blacksmith-shanty. While he was gone Childers tried to get his boot into the stirrup and climb into the saddle. But his horse kept shying away and he wasn't quick enough to manage it. Then Vance was back again and held the bridle, and Childers finally managed to lift his weight up and go belly-down across the leather and then drag his leg over and sit straight. He felt foolish and his weakness put his temper on edge.

When they started out to the head of the lane Childers had to concentrate on keeping his balance. He doggedly gripped the horn and held on and it wasn't until they were nearing the rock outcropping at the foot of the pasture fence that he was steady enough to realize Vance had his reins and was leading his animal. That irritated him and very deliberately he fell forward against his horse's neck, snatched at the reins and managed somehow to push himself straight again.

Vance looked quickly around and slowed until they were riding abreast. "Better?" he asked.

"Nothing's wrong," Childers muttered.

"Sure there isn't. You're doing fine."

Childers gauged those words sensitively, trying to find mockery or sympathy in them. But there was none. Vance had spoken mattter-of-factly.

That started a strange and troubled train of thought in Childers on which he concentrated so intently he was barely aware of the passage of time or the miles they covered. Once his absorption broke before the surprised awareness that they were travelling the trail below Turkey Hill. How they had come that far without his realizing it he neither knew nor cared and presently he lapsed once more into his pain-racked reverie that had to do with Spane, Vance, Stirrup and the contradictions this night had brought. His thoughts of Vance were quite searching and surprisingly logical; there were things about the man he'd had no way of understanding until now.

Long afterward—how long it was Childers had no way of knowing — Vance drawled abruptly, "Someone's coming up behind us," and Childers roused to the realization that they were riding the town road close below Box. He caught rapid hoof-echoes from behind him along the road and turned to look back there, seeing two bright orange spots of light down the road, guessing from the rhythm of the sound that it would be a team pulling a light rig of some kind.

Then Vance was saying, "It's likely some of your folks. Keep straight on." And before the other could speak he had reined away in the darkness.

Fred, as he rode clear of the road, pulled in and sat watching the buggy come up out of the shadows. The team was at a fast trot and the buggy was close to Childers before the lamps brought him into sight. The driver pulled in quickly and said something unintelligible at this distance and then abruptly another voice, a woman's cried out in alarm.

"Is it really Bill?" Fred heard her ask.

It took Fred but a moment to be sure of that voice. He had heard it two nights ago there in the lobby of the hotel. It was Rita Kirby.

Only later was he to wonder at the chance he took then. At the time it seemed the logical thing that he should draw Spane's .45, lift rein and start in on the buggy. By that time Rita and the man with her were standing in the road close beside Childers' horse. They were talking, though he couldn't distinguish their words.

RITA was the first to hear him coming and turned to face him, her look startled. Then the man's head swung quickly this way and he took a step out from Bill's horse, his right hand starting toward the handle of a gun at his belt. Abruptly he saw Fred's Colt lined at him and his hands lifted slowly, warily to the level of his shoulders.

"Vance!" Rita breathed in a barely audible voice as Fred came well into the light of the buggy lamps and swung down out of the saddle.

He walked over to her companion and lifted a short-barreled weapon from the man's belt. And then enough of the girl's surprise left her to let her ask, "What are you doing here?"

Fred was tossing the Box crewman's gun across into the buggy now as Childers chuckled, saying, "Get him to tell you about it! We had one sweet scrap!"

Rita's glance hadn't strayed from Fred

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and in her bewilderment she said, "But they're looking for you! How does it happen—"

"Looking for Vance?" Childers wanted to know. He was sitting hunched forward tiredly in the saddle and he spoke with an obvious effort.

"He broke jail this afternoon," the girl's companion put in tonelessly.

With a pointed glance at Rita, Fred came in beside Childers' stirrup then and reached up to take a hold on the Box man's arm, drawling, "Time to get down, Bill."

Childers pulled his arm free, saying querulously, "I stay where I am."

"Why, when you can take it easy?" Fred nodded to the other Box man, adding, "A little help, friend." Then, before Childers would draw away again, he reached up and took a hold on his belt and pulled hard.

Childers came out of the saddle heavily, trying to push them away. Once he was aground he would have fallen but for Fred and the other man holding him erect. For a moment he weakly tried breaking away but then abruptly he gave in and let them lead him across to the buggy and help him up into it. He sank back against the seat muttering, "You and me, Vance, we could——"

Whatever his thought he didn't complete it; but there was enough meaning to his words to make Rita Kirby eye Fred with a wondering, puzzled look. He was very aware of her closeness, of her lithe slenderness and of the beauty of her face set in such seriousness as she asked in a hushed, frightened way, "What's wrong with him? His face—and the way he talks!"

"He's going to be all right," Fred said, shaking his head to warn her that she was saying the wrong thing.

Childers said quickly, "You should've seen it, Rita. There was this gun pointed straight at him and then——"

Once again his words trailed off so that the meaning behind them was obscure and Rita, now halfway understanding the urgency of Fred's glance, said quickly, "Joe, take Bill's horse on in!"

"Better let me stay with you."

"No! You go on. Get some water on to heat in the kitchen. And hurry!"

Her tone sent Joe across to Bill's horse at once and as he went to the saddle and started away Rita nodded to Fred and stepped on out to the edge of the road behind the buggy.

When he had followed and was standing beside her she said, "Now tell me."

"Let Bill tell it. You're wasting time."

She looked up at him, eyes bright with anger. "You did this to him?"

"No."

"Then who did?"

"A hard case by the name of Spane."

"Jeff Spane?" she breathed almost inaudibly. "How—"

"All this talk won't do Bill any good," Fred reminded her.

Now the anger seemed to leave her and he heard her sigh in a baffled way as she started back to the buggy. He followed, giving her a hand as she climbed the step to the seat alongside Childers. And before she could sit back he had to reach across and push Childers out of the way.

She unwound the reins from the whip-socket, her hands shaking. Then, about to speak to the team, she hesitated and looked down at him. "I don't know why you've done this," she said in a low voice. "But I'm grateful. Very."

A smile broke across his lean face. "It's a good thing your father isn't listening," he drawled. "By the way, has Sayers got the whole town out after me?"

"Dad didn't say. He was with the sheriff when I left."

"You can tell him I've moved in at Stirrup."

She stared across at him speculatively. "Do you expect to say?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "That depends on a few things, Miss Kirby."

She tightened the reins now, still looking at him, saying deliberately, "At any rate I wish you luck, Vance."

"Much obliged. I may need it."

She slapped the team into motion now and as the buggy pulled away she looked around at him, hardly yet believing that this was happening to her, that Vance had had the cool nerve to ride this close to Box.

SHE watched his tall shape standing there in the road until the night swallowed him and then turned and looked at Bill. His weight was sagging heavily against her shoulder. For the first time now she saw his face closely and the shock of seeing its

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disfigurement brought on a real panic in her. A dark stain showed against the light cloth of her coat. She knew it was blood. She reached for the whip then.

Now and then as the buggy rattled along the road she could hear Bill's labored breathing and that heightened her fear until she wondered if he would be alive when the drive was over. When she finally turned in along the lane of poplars below the house she had the team at a run.

THEY were waiting for her there at the yard gate, Foster and Zinn and Red, the ones who should have been at Stirrup, and Joe Banks. And as she stood aside, letting them lift Bill out of the buggy, she held back the questions she wanted to ask. She told them, "Take him to his room," before she ran up to the kitchen.

A kettle was boiling on the stove. She found some clean rags in one of the cupboards. Crossing the yard to the porch fronting Bill's room in the short wing of the house she saw that his doorway was lighted now and that the others stood waiting at the foot of the steps.

It was Foster who said as she passed him, "He won't let us touch him, Miss. You may need help."

"I'll manage," she answered.

Joe Banks moved out of the doorway to let her into the room. Bill was standing by the marble-topped washstand. His shirt was off and he was bent over, sloshing water from the basin onto his face. He heard her come in and turned away to reach for a towel and covered his face with it before he turned to say gruffly, "I'll do this myself, Rita."

She carried the kettle and rags over and put them on the washstand. Then she looked at him in a pleading way. "Please, Bill, let me help."

He shook his head.

She sensed that she could accomplish nothing by insisting, so as she slowly backed toward the door she asked, "Are you going to tell me about Fred Vance?"

Interest came alive in his eyes and he forgot to keep his battered face covered as he said, "You should've seen him. There's a man to take along! Waded right in and—"

His words broke off abruptly as a heavy tread crossed the porch. She could no longer look at his face so glanced toward the door, surprised to see that it was her father who was there.

Kirby stopped barely across the threshold, rage patterning his craggy face. But what he saw shocked him and his look softened. "Good God, man! They didn't tell me it was this bad!"

Bill remembered the towel now and covered his face again and when he didn't speak Kirby gave Rita an amazed look, asking, "Was it Vance?"

"No." It was Bill who answered him. "Vance helped me, got me out of a damned tight spot."

"Then who was it?"

Bill shook his head tiredly. "Jim, I'm played out. Let me alone, will you?"

Kirby said stubbornly, "We're going back there after Vance."

Bill again moved his head from side to side. "Not me."

"Of course not you. There's six of us without you."

"It won't do you any good. Vance won't be there now."

Kirby swore acidly and, turning to go out again, snapped, "Rita, look after him."

Bill stood eyeing the door for several seconds after it had closed behind Kirby. At length his glance moved around to Rita. "He's not going to like this," he said deliberately. "But I'm pulling out."

Her expression had been tender and full of sympathy. But now his words jarred her, turned her wide-eyed. "Leaving?"

He nodded. "Tonight. Now."

"Bill, you can't!"

Her helpless stunned look made him say quickly, savagely almost, "Just let it go at that, Rita. I'm quittin'. Maybe I'll be back. You can tell Jim that."

"But—" she said helplessly, "you're hurt, Bill. Badly."

"I've got my second wind now."

"Dad can't get along without you."

"Foster knows the ropes well enough."

A subtle change turned her glance into one that seemed to probe at his innermost thoughts as she said gently, "There's something you're not telling us, Bill."

"About Spane? Ask the others."

"I don't mean that. There's something else. Something about Fred Vance."

She knows, he was telling himself as he

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finally found it impossible to meet her glance any longer and turned away.

"Can you tell me about it?" she asked quietly.

"Look, Rita." He wondered if he could tell her of the difference this night had made in his way of looking at things. Just a minute ago the coolness of the water against his face had chilled the fever from his brain and he had been able to see the last hour and a half in its proper perspective. He wanted very much to tell her his thoughts now, wanted her to understand them; for her opinion meant a great deal. But then he knew that until he understood those thoughts himself there was no possible way of explaining them.

So he said wearily, "Did you ever have a knot tied up inside you and not be able to jerk it loose?"

"Perhaps. I know what you mean."

"You have to get it untied, don't you? Well, that's why I'm leaving."

HE HAD hoped without quite knowing how it would come about that he could get away without seeing Jim Kirby again. But now that hope died as Kirby's solid steps crossed the porch once more and the man's huge shape moved in through the door.

Kirby was furious; that much was at once obvious even before he asked sharply, "What's this about Spane? What's that mangy little four-flusher trying to do to us?"

"He thought he was working for Vance," Bill told him. "He isn't any more."

Kirby's exasperation made him say, "You're talking hogwash!"

"That's all I know, Jim. Spane came in there to move us out claimin' Vance had hired him. Then Vance showed up and sided with me against him, kicked him off the place."

"None of that makes sense."

"So it doesn't." Bill shrugged. "But that's what happened."

He'd suddenly had enough of Kirby's dictatorial manner and now he pulled on his shirt and stepped around the big man and to the door.

"Where you going?" Kirby wanted to know.

"Out. Ask Rita about it." And Bill hurried on across the porch and down the steps.

Kirby started to follow and Rita said quickly, "Let him alone, Dad!" Passing him on her way to the door she touched his arm and gave him a fleeting smile to take the sting from her words. Then she hurried on out after Bill, who was crossing the yard toward the barn.

He heard her coming and stopped, facing around to say quietly, "I was counting on you. Now you're making it harder."

"I'm not trying to stop you, Bill. But there's something you should know before you leave—if you're going to see Fred Vance."

"What?" He straightened a little in his surprise and though the shadows didn't let her see much, she judged that his swollen face had relaxed out of its angry set.

"I'll leave it to you what to tell him. But I was there in Ben Sayers' office with Dad when they made their plans. Ben has taken four men up to watch Summit and the pass trails. Harry Wilson and two others are to the south along the Bearpaw. Dad is supposed to be keeping an eye on Stirrup."

He was looking at her fixedly and it was a long moment before he spoke. "Why would you be wanting to do this for Vance?"

"You'll be doing it, Bill, not me," she answered hesitantly.

Though she wouldn't have believed it possible, his misshapen face actually took on a smile now. "Rita," he said, "you should've been a man." And with these enigmatic words he turned about face and left her.

He was thankful no one was at the corral to hound him with questions. He hurried, fearing someone would come down here and try to stop him. He caught up the first animal that would stand and take the bridle. Only when he had saddled and was riding out the lane did the tension drain away and let him really feel the throbbing of his head again.

The ride back to Stirrup seemed longer than the one across here with Vance; yet he was feeling stronger and, for a private reason, keyed up by having found the nerve to quit Kirby. Yesterday, even two hours ago, the possibility of leaving Box would have seemed ridiculous. Yet here he was, on his own by choice.

He was within sight of the dark shadow of the cottonwoods lying against the

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paler pattern of Stirrup's lower meadow when he had the awesome thought, *Maybe I'll have to clear out after all.* That sobered him so that as he rode in on the darkened layout he was thinking straighter than he had been.

First he went to the corral. It was open, empty, and that was disappointing. Remembering what an effort it was to walk, he stayed in the saddle and rode back up to the crew-quarters.

He reined in within a few strides of the door and sat listening a moment. No sound came to him. He caught the taint of coal-oil in the air and would have smiled but for the aching of his face.

He drew in a deep breath finally and called, "Vance!"

The echo of his voice shuttling back from the barn held a hollow, feeble note. He was all at once feeling very much alone.

"Vance!" he called again.

Abruptly he heard a sound behind him. It came from the direction of the wagon-shed.

He turned in the saddle and saw Fred Vance's tall shape coming toward him out of the shadows. He pulled the horse on around so that he faced Vance. And now that dread loneliness had left him.

He wondered how he could say what he wanted to say and his search for words was futile. In the end he stated simply, "I'm back."

Vance had stopped and was looking up. He shook his head slowly. "Don't make me do it, Bill. You're inside my fence and you don't belong. No one from Box does. I thought you knew that."

"I do," Bill said quietly. Then: "I've quit Kirby."

"You've what?" Vance's tone was awed.

"Quit. I'm here to stay, Vance. If you'll let me."

The starlight let Bill see the reserve that settled across Vance's face and he said urgently, "It's no trick! No one sent me. I'm here to side you. I want a job, any job."

"Why?" came Fred's toneless query.

"You saved my hide tonight."

"That's not reason enough."

"Then I'm sick of swingin' the whip for Kirby. Put it that way."

"That's better." Fred was silent a moment, peering up intently at the man. "They'll be on my tail, Bill. It'll be long hours and cold camps. Maybe they'll run me out."

"Like hell they will!"

Now a slow, broad smile softened the angles of Fred's face. And he said gently, "Better light and come inside. We'll see if there's any coffee."

Bill Childers was grateful for the way Fred stepped on past him then and into the bunkhouse, leaving him alone. He was also thankful for the darkness. He wasn't a man who often let another see this much of his feelings and he badly need this solitary interval that was letting him get a grip on himself.

RITA KIRBY was wakened with the dawn next morning by her father's heavy step along the hallway. She lay dozing for several minutes, vaguely hearing the clatter of dishes and pans sounding from the kitchen, wondering why the cook was up and around at this ungodly hour. Then she remembered. The crew would be going across to Stirrup.

She got up at once and by the time she came into the dining room Jim Kirby was just leaving the table, his breakfast finished and his early-morning cigar already lighted.

She said, "Give me two minutes and I'll ride as far as the forks with you, Dad." On her way across to the kitchen door she noticed his scowl and stopped. "Are you in too much of a hurry?"

"No." His glance dropped to her waist. She was wearing a plaid calico shirt, boots and a pair of clean but worn waist-overall she had swapped Joe Banks, the wrangler, for a pair of splur leathers. And now she knew what was bothering her father even before he said sternly, "It's unbecoming of a lady to be got up like a man, Rita. Better change to a skirt."

"But I'm going across to see Lola and Tom. That's too far to ride with your leg wound around a side saddle. If you don't believe me, try it." And with a smile she went on into the kitchen.

By the time she ran down to the corral Foster had her paint saddled and ready. There were four more of the crew ready to ride, Joe Banks, Red Owens, Mel West and old Charly Simpson. And as they started out the lane she came in beside her

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father to ask mischievously, "Do you think you're taking enough men, Dad?"

He eyed her obliquely in a severe way. "Bill needs more help over there."

"So he does."

His glance sharpened. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"Nothing." She was regretting her levity now. "You said Bill needed more help. I agreed."

"Do you think I'm letting Vance scare me off?" he bridled.

"No. You'll stay on Stirrup even if you run short of help here."

"Is anything wrong with that?"

"Dad," she said mildly," you're right in every way. And it's too nice a day to spoil by arguing."

HE RODE on in sullen silence, hanging back out of the others' dust. But he was worrying the thing about in his mind. He was much in need of Rita's opinion on a certain matter and, knowing she had a mind of her own much like her mother had had before her, he finally chose a different and a milder approach.

"I'd certainly like to know what was stuck in his craw last night," was how he put it.

She simply nodded. She didn't ask who he was talking about, in fact didn't say anything. That made him burst out, "Good Lord, I pay him as much as any ranch boss in the Territory and he leaves me flat when I need him most!"

Rita gave him an oddly speculative glance. "Money doesn't buy everything, Jim."

Her "Jim" gave him warning; only when she was utterly grave or when she was in a nice way trying to tell him he'd done something wrong did she ever call him that. It sobered him now, made him ask, "Just what have I done to him, girl? Just what?"

"It isn't what you've done, Dad. It's what Fred Vance has done."

"And what has he?"

She only shook her head and stood in the stirrups to push her horse on faster; and as she drew on ahead he sensed that she was trying to avoid saying anything that would hurt his feelings. That roused his stubbornness and he reined on beside her again, asking doggedly, "What has Vance done?"

She gave him a helpless look. "I don't know what's wrong with Bill, Dad. I honestly don't. If you made me say what I'm thinking it would only make you angry. Anyway, I'm just guessing."

"Then guess out loud. I'm trying to get to the bottom of this."

Once more they slowed their animals, letting Foster and the others draw away. And presently Rita looked around at him. "I think Bill's ashamed of what you're doing to Vance. Just that, nothing more. I think he respects Vance more than he does —more than——"

"More than he does me?" Kirby growled.

"No. Not that. Bill respects you. What I was going to say is that perhaps Bill respects Vance more than he does himself. There's a way of looking at this that makes it seem you're not being quite fair with Fred Vance, that Bill himself isn't."

"Is a man to be respected when he hires a known rustler, maybe a killer to work for him?"

"No, Dad. I'm not thinking of that."

"Do you know Jeff Spane? Have you ever laid eyes on him?"

"I have. He got opposite me in the stage coming across from Dry Wells that time last summer. He's a poor specimen."

A moment ago Kirby had been holding a tight rein on his unstable temper. But now quite suddenly his anger left him. "So I'm not being fair with Vance. You're thinking of my taking out that warrant on him?"

"That to begin with."

"You must not think he killed Milt."

"I don't. You don't either. Nor does Bill."

He couldn't keep a straight face. "All right, that point's yours. Let's say I have my doubts. If I didn't the whole crew would have gone back there last night instead of waiting till now. Keeping Vance locked up was just a way of cooling him off so he could see the sense of this lease."

"It didn't cool him much. He's no longer locked up, he's outbluffed our men once and he can do it again. So where are you?"

"To tell the truth, Rita, exactly where I started."

"You're not even that far. To begin with you had a chance for the lease. Now you've

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lost it. You've made an enemy of Fred Vance. He can make you so miserable you'll be wishing you'd never thought of the lease."

He eyed her with an open respect. "That's something I'd like your opinion on. If you were Vance how would you go about making me eat crow?"

"Why, I'd—I'd probably cut fence and start pushing your cattle off the place."

"I've thought of that. I'll put fence riders out. What else?"

She lifted her square shoulders. "Vance doesn't have anything to lose. You've made it so. He can come in at night and shoot the windows out of the bunkhouse. He could—there are any number of things he could do, Dad. You lose regardless of what he does."

"I've thought of that, too." He was quite serious now. "So how would you go about it if you were me?"

"The way Bill's doing. Make my peace with him. Let him have Stirrup."

His jaw tightened and that anger she knew so well flashed in his eyes. "That I won't do!"

"In that case I have no suggestions to offer, Senator."

"Don't make a joke of it," he said severely, his frown reprimanding her. "I can beat him in the courts."

"Can you? And still do what you'd like in Washington? You'll have to be here to testify, you know. The hearing may come at an awkward time."

"Keely's going to rush this case through now. We can still stay over another week and give me time for everything that needs doing back East."

She smiled at him in a pitying way. "This will take longer than a week, Dad."

HE FELL silent again, staring vacantly ahead, and when Rita saw that they were coming up on the side-trail that swung east into the higher hills she halfway thought of going on with him to Stirrup and riding to Cross D the long way. But the day was too pleasant to be spoiled by prolonging this worry over her father's affairs; besides, she was eager to see Tom.

So as they came up on the forks she told him, "Don't look for me before the middle of the afternoon."

He stopped, eyeing her speculatively, "So you don't think Bill will be there?"

"Did I say I thought that?"

"No, but you do." He waited. When she said nothing he asked, "Want to make a bet on it?"

"I hope he is there, Dad. For your sake."

"But you don't think he will be. Come on, here's your chance to make an honest dollar." He smiled meagerly. "I say Bill hasn't quit me, you think he has. Are you sure enough of your hunch to put up your two best steers against any two of mine you want to pick?"

Years ago on the Christmas when Rita had been eight her father had given her a dozen heifers as a present. They had been branded with a Box M, the M for Marguerite. Since then his crew had put that brand on each of her calves. Her herd had multiplied, she had added to it out of the proceeds of selling off the old and poor animals. And last fall her tally had run nearly a seventh of the total on Box; now she was paying the wages of one crewman out of her own pocket. So she was in a position to cover his wager.

She thought about it a moment now, eyeing him amusedly. "Why be a piker, Dad? You're so sure, let's make it five."

"Five it is." He held out his hands. Things were always man-fashion between them.

That hand-shake went beyond the sealing of their bargain. Rita knew that it was intended to smooth over their disagreement. Her father was always that way, sorry afterward for his outbursts of temper, eager to make amends. And now as they parted she watched him run his horse on after the others. When he turned finally and waved, she took it as meaning that he was over his grouch.

By the time she rode into the timber, climbing now, her mood was lighter and she was beginning to enjoy the day. The cool piney sweetness of the air, the bright dappled sunlight slanting through the trees brought a slow exhilaration that washed her mind clean of the troubles of last night and this morning. Yet she had a hard time dismissing her curiosity about Bill Childers. It was strangely heartening to suppose that he was with Fred Vance now; it gave her a guilty feeling to realize that in wishing Bill

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well she was being a little disloyal to her father. But from the moment she had learned that Vance wouldn't lease she had been against trying to hold Stirrup.

SHE was wishing now that Bill had told her more about last night, or that she had insisted on Vance telling her what had happened. At first it had seemed incongruous to think of Fred Vance helping Bill Childers or any other Box man. But now she had the disquieting conviction that this was exactly the thing one might expect of him. She didn't know exactly why she thought this of him, for her upbringing had taught her an outright dislike of his very name. Still, she did realize that it had taken some downright nerve for him to bring Bill across there last night when he must have known that not only the sheriff but Jim Kirby would be diligently hunting for him.

But now she wanted to forget the Stirrup trouble, to forget Bill Childers and Vance, Spane, her father's indecision. And she finally did close her mind to all these things. When, after riding steadily for half an hour, she came to the clearing in which sat the ruin of Dean's abandoned homestead cabin above The Springs, she stopped and got down to pick some of the wild flowers that streaked the clearing with myriad color.

It was while she knelt there, making up a bouquet for Lola, that she heard ever so faintly a sound that might have been the distant crackle of rifle fire. But then a light breeze ran up the slope, laying a whisper through the tops of the pines. And when she had paused to listen for several more seconds, hearing nothing but the wind, her momentary uneasiness left her.

IT WAS Fred, standing in the doorway of the kitchen lean-to while he drank the last of his breakfast coffee, who saw the dust far out along the south slope and drawled, "Visitors, Bill."

Childers got up from the table and came to stand behind him, looking out over his shoulder and trying to open his bad eye wider. Except for two ugly red gashes and the swelling on that side of his face, plus his nose being a good deal wider than usual, the beating had done him no harm beyond what a couple more nights of solid sleep wouldn't cure.

"That'll be Kirby," Bill said shortly.

Fred nodded. He turned into the room, put his cup on the table and eyed Bill soberly. "Now's your last chance to change your mind, friend."

Bill grunted his disgust. "Save your talk for when it'll count. What do we do, get out or hang on?"

Fred stood staring out through the doorway at that plume of dust in the south. Some thought finally gave his blue eyes an amused glint and he said, "We get out. But we have some fun on the way."

"How?"

Fred explained, and presently they left the kitchen and went to the corral for their horses. It was Bill who finally led the two saddled animals on up into the cottonwoods behind the house and tied them. By the time he was back again Fred was roping two blanket rolls and shortly carried them to the window alongside the double bunks to drop them outside. Bill had meantime lifted down a Winchester over the head of his bed and pulled another from a disorderly pile of gear in the far corner, drawling:

"Red won't be needin' this."

They found a box of shells on the sill of the front window and as they stood there looking out Fred rolled up a smoke and passed his tobacco across. Childers divided his glance about evenly between his hands and the bottom of the meadow, where Kirby and his five crewmen were now following the trail as it angled out from the pines.

Presently Bill said acidly, "He's so damned sure of himself."

Fred didn't speak for several seconds. Then he asked, "Which one will be the hardest to scare?"

"Kirby."

"Who after him?"

"Foster. The one on the claybank."

"You can take Kirby then, I take Foster. When they get to this side of the rock."

The "rock" was a granite shelf, an outcropping, some three feet high around which the trail bent before lining straight for the corrals. It was nearly two hundred yards away and now as Red and Foster in the lead turned past it Bill hefted the

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.30-.30 up and laid it across the window-sill.

Fred moved less hastily, saying, "Let 'em come on a bit. And remember, low."

Shortly he had Foster in the notch of the carbine's sight. He let the front sight drop then, eased out half a breath and said, "Now."

A split-second before the weapon jarred his shoulder, Bill's exploded sharply. He saw the puff of dust spring up two feet out from the left front hoof of Foster's horse as he was levering in another shell. He laid his sights again, eased on the trigger as a rider wheeled in line, then squeezed off the next shot. It was a moment before he caught the shrill whine of his bullet ricochetting from the face of the outcropping. And now alongside him Bill Childers started laughing.

Fred leaned there watching and enjoying it as Bill threw three more shots. Foster had slammed into the man behind him and his horse was bucking off the trail and away from the others who were running for the rock and away from Kirby, who was standing fast. The first man to reach the outcropping vaulted from the saddle and let his animal go on, diving for cover. Kirby was backing that way, having a hard time managing his nervous animal as he pulled a Winchester from the scabbard under his leg. A voice shouting in anger carried in over the distance and Fred guessed it was Kirby as the man turned finally and ran on past the outcropping leading Foster and one other away.

THOSE three stopped well down the meadow, a good four hundred yards below, and as the two Box men rode up to Kirby Fred could see him pointing off toward the trees. Then shortly Foster and the other man headed across there with their horses at a run.

"Time to go," Fred said.

A sudden burst of blue smoke showed to one side of the outcropping now and before the sound of the shot reached them there came the solid *whunk!* of the bullet striking the door frame. That hurried Bill as he followed Fred across the room and out the back window. As they picked up their blanket rolls and started running for their horses tied beyond the cottonwoods another shot hit the near-empty pail by the door and it fell banging to the ground.

They stayed out of sight by keeping in line with the building until the trees hid them, a rattle of gunfire rising out of the meadow below now. Fred was settling into the saddle when he heard one of the front windows go out with a jangling of glass. Alongside him, Bill said, "They'll play hell with your bunkhouse before they catch onto it."

After they had ridden a hundred yards up toward the head of the meadow, Fred swung over into the timber. Presently he pulled the sorrel down to a walk and sat half-turned, listening. The sound he was expecting didn't come for a full quarter-minute; and then it came suddenly. There was a breaking of branches far below, then a reckless hoof-drum rose over the racket of gunfire. A voice called something unintelligible down there and some moments later a rifle cracked much closer than the others. Soon a second joined it.

Bill looked at Fred, grinning and shaking his head. The matting of pine needles on the ground muffled the sound of their animals' walk as they started away. The shots, near and far, continued sporadically.

From the trees at the head of the meadow they finally glimpsed Foster and the other Box man shooting from behind a windfall at the rear windows of the bunkhouse. Jim Kirby had finally managed to surround the empty layout.

When Fred had seen enough, he said, "Now we'll look for Josh Hawks," and they started up through the pines, Bill Childers' swollen face set in a satisfied smile. It had been a long time since he'd enjoyed anything this much.

TWO miles above Dean's homestead ruin the trail to Cross D travelled a shallow draw for some distance, presently cutting up a steep and sandy bank to a hummock studded with a thin growth of cedar. Rita gave her horse his head and he slogged into the up-grade at a slow soundless walk. And as she topped the rise she was looking off through the trees toward an open grassy stretch which roughly paralleled the trail ahead.

She didn't see the two men at first, for their animals were standing against the dark backdrop of the timber on the far side of the open ground. But then abruptly one

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horse moved so that the white blaze on his chest showed plainly.

The animal was as surely Tom Demmler's bay as was the stocky shape in the saddle Tom's own.

Rita scarcely looked at the second man in her delight at this prospect of making the rest of the ride with Tom. She had ridden on partway through the trees, going toward the two, when the second man came lazily aground and stood looking up at Tom, evidently talking to him. And in that instant she recognized Jeff Spane and brought her horse quickly to a stand.

She reined back behind a tree, then wheeled and turned down into the draw again, for a moment too surprised to think of anything but of getting out of sight, telling herself that she couldn't embarrass Tom by riding up to him when he was in the company of such a notoriously questionable character as Spane. He had every right to be there with Spane, of course. Some simple straightforward explanation lay behind their being together. They had probably been travelling the trail in opposite directions, had met and stopped to have a smoke and yarn awhile. Rita had lived long enough in this country to know that such meetings were often unavoidable.

BACK in the draw again, she climbed along it for several hundred yards, until she knew she was well above Tom and Spane. Then she cut obliquely across into the timber and after holding this direction for possibly five minutes swung down until she cut the trail again.

She went on slowly now, hoping Tom would overtake her. But then within another mile she came to Cross D's fence, went through the gate and shortly had the layout in sight. She rode on in with a real regret, the prospect of visiting with Lola a decided let-down.

When she came in to the porch she called Lola's name and got no answer. She stepped from the saddle onto the porch and went to the open door and called again. Still there was no answer.

Knowing Lola must be away, she went on in, pausing a moment in the living room to enjoy its freshness and bright color. Going to the kitchen, she put the flowers in a jar and brought them back to the big table in the main room. It was then that the idea of surprising Tom came to her.

She led the horse out back up into the trees behind the root-cellar, tying him, feeling a keen disappointment over the possibility that Tom might perhaps be gone for the day. Back in the house again she was feeling restless, undecided as to what to do. The kitchen was clean, everything in order, not even so much as a plate on the table to let her guess what Tom's and Lola's plans for the day might be. She sauntered out onto the porch and sat at its edge, an idle glance at the sun telling her that the morning was better than half gone. A jay hopping upward along the branches of a spruce close by began scolding her. She was feeling out of sorts, her disappointment keen.

Perhaps that mood was the reason for her seeing what she did as she looked down at the corral and the barn. She had been here only twice before and both times in Tom's company, enjoying every minute of her stay. She had found the cabin pleasant, Lola's cooking a rare treat. If she had ever noticed anything but the house except in a superficial way she couldn't recall it.

But now her critical eye picked out several things about the place that were disconcerting. The hay rake, for instance, sat rusting in the open while thirty feet away the open-sided barn's runaway stood empty of everything but a pile of harness lying near the door. The harness shouldn't be there, of course. Neither should the empty cans and the broken bottles be littering the space between the barn's end and a nearby shed. The tin roof of that shed was loose at one corner—probably the wind worked the nails out—and curled up so that whatever was stored inside was exposed to the elements. It would have taken a man only a few minutes' work to fix it.

She caught herself just then, thinking irritably, *You're anything but perfect, so why take it out on Tom!* And to forestall any further fault-finding she went inside again. There was a shelf of books and periodicals over the settee. She found a pattern book and sat down with it and when the sound of a horse on the way up the trail reached her nearly an hour later she was deeply engrossed in Godey's design for a velveteen afternoon dress.

It was Tom. Rita stood back out of sight

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at the door as she remembered how she'd hidden the horse. Her surprise would be complete. And all at once she was happy again and smiling.

She watched him turn the bay into the corral and carry his saddle out, closing the gate. Then, when he abruptly dropped the saddle, letting it fall into the dust, her smile went away. She had always been taught to look after things and what he did now only reminded her of the things she had noticed earlier.

BUT then she saw the head-down and brooding way he was sauntering up the path toward the house and in wondering at it forgot the other. That he had something on his mind was quite obvious. His manner sobered her, took away her light-heartedness. And now suddenly she decided it would be unfair for her to surprise him quite so completely.

So she called out when he was coming up on the rose arbor at the foot of the path. He came to a quick halt and his head lifted in startlement. Then a slow smile broke across his face.

"Rit!" He was delighted and hurried up the path to the foot of the steps. "Would you believe it? I was on my way up here to grab a bit and then get across to see you. Talk about luck, mine's in!"

"You've even got a cook," she said. "Where's Lola?"

"Left me. We went across to Anderson's to see about his helping me next week. When it came time to leave she and Mildred hadn't had their talk out. So she's put me on my own for the day."

"Then we'll eat up everything good we can find."

"Let's!" He came up beside her, full of eagerness now, took her hand and led her on through the living-room and into the kitchen. "She's got some strawberries hid somewhere. And I cut steaks last night. There are eggs and—"

"And that's enough, Tom!"

He laughed and started for the door leading out onto the stoop. It was then that she suddenly remembered he hadn't heard about last night and before she had quite thought it out she was saying, "Tom, did you know that Fred Vance broke out of jail yesterday?"

He stopped in the doorway, turned slowly. "Fred what?"

"Broke jail. Dad was with him in the sheriff's office and—"

A thought cut her short. *But he's seen Spane and Spane knows!*

"Then what?" Tom asked.

In her confusion Rita made the best of it, saying after only a slight hesitation, "He got out the window and away before they could stop him. And that's not all," she added, trying to believe that he was really as surprised as he looked.

"Not all? You mean there's more?"

His question was so absolutely guileless that she told herself he couldn't possibly know about this. Spane naturally wouldn't have mentioned it. So now her keen relief brought her words in a rush, "Last night he was at Stirrup with that Jeff Spane. Spane was evidently working for him. Bill Childers was badly beaten and—"

"No!"

That one explosive word and his contrite look made her ask quickly, "What have I said, Tom?"

"It isn't what you've said," he told her ruefully. "It's what I've done! This—it's probably all my fault, Rita. You say Bill took a bad beating?"

"Yes." She studied him questioningly until she realized he might notice something strange in her. "But why say it's your fault?"

"Fred wanted a crew, asked me to find him some men. Men who would play it rough, he said. I couldn't think of anyone who'd fit that order better than Spane. So night before last I rode up to Summit and hired him to bring a crew down. Now he's gone hog wild, has he?"

She was staring at him so oddly that after a moment he asked, "What's wrong, Rita?"

"You didn't—didn't know what Spane had done last night?"

He lifted his hands outward in an unknowing gesture. The answer she was praying he wouldn't give came then:

"How could I know?"

IV

RITA stood speechless, her doubt suddenly real and engulfing all her thoughts. She felt weak and overwhelmed by Tom's denial. And as she stared at him

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wide-eyed, her face losing color, he seemed all at once a different man.

Only when he said with abrupt concern, "Rita, you're pale!" and stepped toward her did she realize she must hide her emotion.

She gave an uneasy laugh and reached up and ran a hand across her forehead. "Too much of the sun, probably. I should have worn a hat."

"Here." He pulled a chair over and made her sit in it. He brought her a cup of water and she drank every drop of it though she wasn't thirsty, drank it slowly so that she would have time to think. It gave her an excuse for not speaking; it was something to distract him while she regained her self-control.

When she finally set the cup aside her thoughts were steadier and she realized she must somehow hide her doubt until she understood it. The best way of doing that, she decided, was to avoid the subject that had brought it on. Only in that way would Tom believe her explanation of what had caused the sudden change in her.

So now she said, "That's better. But about Fred Vance, Tom. They're hunting him. Dad was furious. He's even thinking of offering a reward."

"He's making a mistake if he does." His look was still full of concern and he asked, "You're sure you're all right?"

She nodded. "You know how much Dad listens to anyone. Another thing that's upset him is losing Bill Childers." And at his surprised look she went on to tell him of last night. But she didn't mention that she suspected Bill was with Vance, an uneasy instinct cautioning her against confiding too much in him.

What she had to say seemed to please him and when she had finished he told her quite soberly, "If Childers has quit you won't keep the others for long. Fred's dead serious about this, Rita. He'll fight if you drive him to it."

"Dad's finding that out."

"Then why doesn't your father pull in his horns, tear up that warrant and move out of Stirrup?"

She smiled and shook her head, coming up out of her chair now and going to the shelf in the corner of the room to take down plates and silverware. As she set them on the table she said, "When you find out how my father's mind works I wish you'd explain it to me, Tom. But can't we forget all this before it spoils our day?" She glanced toward the back door. "You're forgetting the strawberries. And we need cream."

The several minutes he was gone let her get a better hold on herself and, having led him away from the subject, when he came back in she at once mentioned something else. By the time they sat down to the meal Tom seemed in good spirits again and she had decided she was being extremely foolish.

Some simple explanation lay behind what now appeared to be his out and out lie; she wouldn't believe he had deliberately deceived her. So she put all thought of what he had said aside, postponing any attempt at reasoning it out.

THE awkardness between them was gone and only once over the two hours they were together did he again mention the Stirrup trouble. They were sitting at the edge of the porch watching the clouds building up over the peaks close to the east and he was telling her of his plans for the lease. He had been saying he would stock his eastern end of Stirrup by buying culls from a Texas herd due to arrive within the next two weeks at a reservation agency thirty miles south of Lodgepole. Then abruptly his look of eagerness faded before a worried one that prompted her to say:

"Yes, Tom. And then?"

He shook his head. "What's the use of planning? Before any of this can happen I'll have to find Fred and help him get squared away. Which puts me on the other side of the fence from Jim Kirby."

"Lots of people are on the opposite side of the fence from Dad, Tom."

He gave her a grateful look, one that thanked her for her understanding, and in that moment he seemed so likeable and straightforward that she wondered what inane twisting of words had ever made her doubt him. She was on the point of asking him outright how it happened he hadn't known about Fred Vance when he had seen Spane this morning. But the impulse died before her desire that nothing should spoil this pleasant interval.

Finally Rita took warning from the east-

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ward-tipping shadows and told him she must go. "Then I'll come along a couple miles with you," he said. "If Fred's on the loose, one sure way of finding him is to find Hawks. So I'll take a look up Squaw."

STANDING at Stirrup's main corral and looking up northeastward to the peaks, a man with a knowing eye could pick out a short white scar lined across the bright green of the aspen forest that was the final bend of the Summit road close below timberline and the settlement. If he knew where to look he could also see, straight to the east, a pale blue patch lying low against the black shoulder of the highest alp, Sentinel Peak. This was a fringe of spruce edging the rim directly above Demmler's Cross D. The country in between was isolated, wild, crossed two-thirds of the way by but one trail that ended at Anderson's homestead.

Midway between these two points a craggy knob jutted out from the mountain. For three hours now Fred Vance had been sitting with his back to a ledge along the face of that promontory. The sorrel was tied immediately below and out of sight in the pines. Bill Childers was down somewhere along Squaw looking for Josh Hawks, his tiredness and soreness making him glad to have been spared the hard climb with Fred.

Several times over this long interval Fred had longed for a pair of field glasses. Every detail of the low country lay spread out before him, he had seen the comings and goings of several riders and knew generally that he must be responsible for some of them being on the move—the ones cruising up and down the Summit road particularly. Yet the distance was too great for him to recognize a single man.

He had particularly watched the two horsemen who had come closest to him during the middle afternoon, following the trail that ended at Anderson's. The homestead down there was new since his day and he idly wondered just who the man could be who had cleared land and built a cabin in this high country where until now the Demmlers had had things to themselves. Anderson's clearing lay a little better than a mile below and to the north, plainly in sight. He had seen the two riders stop there to be met by a man who walked up from the barn. The three stood by the horses evidently talking for some minutes and were presently joined by two women who came out of the cabin.

Some twenty minutes after they had ridden into the clearing the pair went on, cutting off through the forest in the direction of the Summit road. Now and then Fred sighted them as they topped a rise or crossed an open stretch and finally, certain they weren't swinging back in his direction, he lost interest in them. It was shortly after this that he saw one of the women ride away from the cabin and out the trail in his direction.

He watched her coming on now, incuriously sighting her several times through the downward pines. After several minutes she rode into the open again, starting across the foot of the slope directly below where a fallen-away rim had uprooted all but a few big ponderosa. It was when she came out into the strong sunlight that he gave a start and sat straighter. Even at this distance her bright sorrel hair was unmistakable. She must be Lola Demmler.

A THOUGHT struck him that at once brought him to his feet and sent him hurrying to his horse. He ran the animal recklessly down through the pines and when he came to the trail she was in sight.

She must have caught the racket he made coming down through the timber for shortly after he appeared she drew rein and sat there looking at him; and the thought struck him, *She doesn't know you from Adam.*

He started toward her and immediately she reined her horse halfway around, still looking back at him, leaning forward in the side-saddle as though ready to put her horse into a run back along the trail.

He called, "Lola?" and at once saw her settle back out of her rigid attitude.

He recognized her now and when he was close enough to read her expression he could see that it was a blend of puzzlement and alarm. So he spoke again. "You don't know me, do—"

"Fred!"

Her startled exclamation cut him short. Then as he came in and stopped close in front of her she gave him a look of outright gladness that at once took on concern.

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She turned and looked back down the trail in a wary way, saying quickly, "Get out of sight! Ben Sayers and another man have just ridden through here."

"I know. They kept straight on." He tilted his head toward the high granite shoulder above. "I watched from up there."

Her apprehension left her then and she was smiling, her violet eyes showing an open interest in him. "Now that I know what you look like I can understand."

"Understand what, Lola?"

"How Kirby was tricked this morning." Suddenly she was laughing. "Did you know he sent a man for the sheriff, that he waited until Sayers had arrived before they stopped shooting up the place and went in to find no one there?"

"No!" He chuckled with a genuine amusement. "That was too good a play to let pass. But we didn't think it was that good."

"Is Bill Childers with you?"

She was serious again, surprisingly so, and as he nodded his answer he was remembering how like her this was. Even as a girl her responsiveness and animation had been tempered by a certain mature aloofness and seriousness as subtle as her having just now turned the conversation from its lighter vein.

He wondered at the grave, serious quality in her that was so at odds with her surface prettiness, deciding that it became her, that it hinted at a depth of character to go with her looks. That she was aware of her physical attractiveness seemed apparent, for she was wearing a long flowing riding habit of pale blue, its color accenting the lustrous highlights of her hair, the whiteness of her skin and violet eyes. And as he appreciated her attractiveness he also realized that good taste and her ability as a seamstress were alone responsible for it. Lola was in no position to afford such a habit unless she had made it herself.

"Your set-to with the senator has changed things, Fred," she told him now. "He's sent in to town for more men. Losing Childers doesn't seem to have improved his disposition. He's offering a three hundred dollar reward."

"Dead or alive?" He smiled wryly as he put the question.

"Sayers didn't say. But he doesn't like the looks of it at all. Kirby's going too far."

"According to Sayers?"

"Yes."

He lifted his shoulders, let them fall. "Then what I came down here to see you about makes more sense." He reached out and laid a hand on the sorrel's neck. "Could I come along with you and swap this jughead for one of yours? Without," he added, an amused glint in his eyes, "your knowing anything about it?"

"Of course," she said at once, though she didn't respond to his levity. "Everyone knows by now that you're riding Lee Murchison's pet. But you can't just ride straight home with me."

"Why not?"

"This is a shortcut to Summit. And the men Kirby's sending out will be coming this way." She shook her head as she saw him about to argue the point. "No, I won't let you take the chance. Tell me where you'll be tonight and I'll have Tom bring you the best animal on the place."

He considered that a moment, giving her fears for him less thought than his plans for the night. It was late, around five he supposed, and if he went on to Cross D he was practically doubling the miles he would have to ride to get back to Squaw.

So finally he said, "All right, Tom can do this one thing for me. But that's all. I don't want him mixed up in this."

"You may not want him but he will be," she said positively.

"We'll see," he told her, thinking a moment longer. "If he can be at The Springs tonight about nine I'll be waiting for him."

"He'll be there. If he isn't, I will. What else can he bring?"

"Nothing, thanks. We packed plenty away from Stirrup this morning."

"Is Childers in bad shape?"

"Not too bad. But they really worked him over."

HER eyes showed a faint anger. "It was a mistake for Tom to go to Spane."

"Not his mistake. Mine, Lola."

She shrugged impatiently. "Well, someone's then. Are you leaving the country, Fred?" When he shook his head she went on hurriedly, "Why not? There'll be nothing but trouble for you if you stay. Jim Kirby is a stubborn and very powerful man."

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"Hasn't he always been just that?"

She sighed at this reminder and lifted her reins, putting her horse in alongside his, her look one of real concern. "Then be careful, Fred. By tomorrow Sayers will have every trail and every likely spot covered. He certainly knows about the cabin up Squaw."

"He can't know all the spots that'll keep a man hid."

Her expression momentarily lost its gravity and took on the trace of a smile. "Like Bady's, you mean?"

The name had a familiar sound but he could connect it with nothing he remembered. "Bady's?"

"Don't you remember? The mine 'way above our place right on the side of Sentinel? You and Tom and I rode up there that autumn to fish the creek below it."

He did remember now and, looking back over the years to find this one of the more pleasant memories, he smiled. "Sure enough. We camped there over the night, didn't we? Stuffed ourselves on trout and then had to sit up because it got so cold and we hadn't brought enough blankets. We must've made twenty trips for wood to keep that fire going."

She was pleased at his response and answered his smile, though the wistfulness of her expression told him that she was perhaps too critical in comparing those carefree days to the present. Then when she spoke he was sure of it, for she said, "If only we could go back to those times, Fred." She shrugged away the thought and went on, "As a matter of fact, Bady's would be about the best place I know for you to go—if you have to look for a place to hide. The road to it went out three or four winters ago. One of those ledges fell and wiped it out. Now the gap just hangs there two or three hundred feet up the wall of the canyon."

He frowned. "Then how would a man go about getting to Bady's?"

"From above. Tom and I just happened to find the way in last fall. I doubt that anyone else would know about it. There's nothing to take anyone up there. We would not know if Tom hadn't tracked a bull elk on down from 'way above. I wonder—"

"You wonder what, Lola?" he asked as she paused.

"If you could find your way in." She sat in thought a long moment, finally said, "As I remember it we came in from the north of Sentinel, right below the peak itself. You'll find a deep notch there, the head of this canyon the road used to climb. There's a smaller rock-slide there near the head of the notch and if we hadn't seen this elk climb around it we wouldn't have known there was a way. But there is. Once you're around the slide you come to a ledge barely wide enough to travel. It leads you right onto the bench where we camped."

"Thanks," he drawled with a grin. "I'll keep it in mind. If they crowd me too close there's where I'll head for."

Lola looked back down the trail now in much the same way she had when they met. Then her glance swung around to him once more.

"It's getting late and I'll have to go. Good luck, Fred."

"I may need it," he said.

He sat there watching her go. At the top of the slope where the trail made a bend she turned briefly and looked back, then was gone. And as he put his horse on down through the trees he was wondering what kind of a man her husband had been ever to leave her.

THROUGHOUT the afternoon a murky gray cloud bank had been forming to the west and south and toward sundown its shadow crept across all the low country. It touched Rita as she was turning her horse into Box's corral, the fading light heightening her look of seriousness as she thought of Tom, still wondering about him.

The cloud-shadow cut short the brief twilight in the depths of Squaw where Bill Childers was talking to Tom Demmler at the line-shack. Tom's surprise at having found Childers there was genuine, for Spane hadn't known of the Box man leaving Kirby. He didn't quite understand Childers being with Fred, nor did he particularly like the man being so close-mouthed about why he'd quit Kirby. For it suited his obscure involvement in this affair to have Fred very much on his own, in fact quite helpless. And he was annoyed to learn that Josh Hawks had been here earlier and was now on his way into the hills to meet Fred. What were Fred's plans? Child-

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ers couldn't tell him a thing except that Fred wasn't on his way out. So he finally left, telling Childers he'd like to see Fred if it was at all possible for him to get over to Cross D.

The cloud shadow brought a premature darkness to the tangle of hills running northwest from the head of Stirrup's meadow. Off there in the folds of the hills lay park-like stretches of open grass dotted with the cattle Kirby had thrown onto Stirrup, and tonight a supper fire blazed brightly but out of sight in one of the deep draws near the line of the north fence.

Five men lounged around the blaze. They had finished eating but were in no hurry to start the night's work, knowing that the odds were exceedingly small that anyone would be riding this isolated corner of the range tonight to see them. Jeff Spane was one of the five.

Once, during a lull in their talk, Spane inserted a word to which they paid a strict attention. "Let the fence go once you've cut it. You can forget your back trail and make time. By sun-up you ought to be above Errett's place. From there on it's a dead cinch."

The man hunkered down across the fire from Spane, took a last deep drag on his smoke and tossed it into the flames, drawling, "What's the hitch? This is too easy."

"No hitch at all, Yace. Except you lose some sleep."

One of the others chuckled softly. "I could lose a damn sight more for this kind of money. Does Marolt have everything set at his end?"

"Everything," Spane said. "But remember, fifty to sixty head is his limit. If this goes all right we help ourselves to another bunch night after next."

"If." It was Yace who skeptically echoed that one word. He was the shrewdest of the lot and he was eyeing Spane narrowly now. "What's Demmler taking out of this?"

Spane shrugged. "He gets a third."

"I wasn't talking about money. What else?"

"He's helping Vance clear the layout."

Yace grunted in derision. "Show me the day Demmler helps anyone but himself. He wouldn't be trying to rip Kirby up the belly, would he?"

"Hell, no," one of the others put in mildly. "He's set to marry the Kirby girl, lucky devil."

Spane had had enough of this talk and now came to his feet, grunting against the soreness of his back and beating the dust from the seat of his pants. "I'll see you boys day after tomorrow right here."

He had turned and started toward the horses when Yace's dry tones reminded him, "With the money."

"I'll have it."

As he left the camp and rode southeast, Spane began mulling over in his mind the implications of what Yace had said. It took a man like Yace to peg something you hadn't quite figured out yourself. As Yace had broadly hinted, Demmler must be in this for more than the money involved even though his share was to be considerable if things developed as they should. Spane's experience with Demmler in the past had no parallel to this. Until now he had simply been one of the many who would ignore the law if it stood in the way of survival, and Spane had helped him ignore it. The Cross D had had some hard times since old Demmler's day and a man couldn't be blamed for selling a head or two of his neighbor's beef now and then just to get along.

But this was different. This was rustling on a big scale. Furthermore, Box had over the years made a reputation for dealing with rustlers in an absolute and merciless way. If Demmler hadn't pointed out that Kirby was too busy with Vance to discover his loss until it was too late, Spane wouldn't have risked being caught with so much as a pair of wire-clippers in his saddle-ags. As it was he was keeping strictly away from the actual handling of the stolen beef. He would deal directly with Marolt, handle the money, nothing else.

What about Tom Demmler? What was he after? *Why should you care?* came the immediate answer to those questions. He was getting his and that was as far as he could interest himself.

It took him better than an hour and a half to ride out the wide circle of the upper hills and come down through the trees on Cross D. In his wary way he reined in and sat listening when the outline of the corral stood out of the obscurity.

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He finally saw Demmler leaning there against the gate-post and only then walked his horse on in.

Tom heard him coming and wheeled around. He let Spane get within a few feet of him before asking querulously:

"Where to hell you been? I've got things to do."

"You said after dark," came Spane's mild answer.

"This is two hours after dark." Tom put down his irritation then, asking, "How did it go?"

"Fine. They were all there. By now they'll have made the gather and be through the wire."

"You fixed it with Marolt?"

Spane nodded, looking down narrowly. One thing he'd had on his mind today while making that long ride across to Marolt's was to try and argue Demmler into taking a quarter share rather than a third. But now his argument didn't seem so strong and he decided to let it go as he said, "Thirty dollars a head was his limit."

"Good enough," came Tom's surprising answer. "They'll take 'em through by way of Red Rock?"

Again Spane's head tilted in the affirmative. "Clear to the head of it before they make the swing west. Even a hound wouldn't stand a prayer of following the rest of the way."

Tom's satisfied smile showed even in the starlight. "By the way, Jeff," he drawled, "they've put a reward out for Vance."

Spane peered down at him in silence a moment trying to make out his expression. "Meanin' I should try and collect it? I thought he was a friend of yours."

"He is."

Spane was able to read no meaning whatsoever into these enigmatic words and now, remembering the many miles he had to cover tonight getting back up to Summit he was suddenly impatient to be gone and asked, "When do I see you again?"

"Tomorrow night. Here, only earlier. Make it right after dark."

"We go ahead with the second batch?"

"We do."

Spane said, "Okay," and reined his horse away.

Tom stood watching him go, wondering what contrariness in him had made him nearly tip his hand to the man. He shouldn't have mentioned the reward. He was going to have to be more careful he was thinking as he opened the corral gate and led out the bay and the leggy brown he had decided to take across to Fred.

He led the animals on over to the yard path, dropped the reins and went on to the porch. He was halfway up the steps when suddenly he halted, seeing the pale gray shadow of Lola's figure outlined against the door's black rectangle.

A sudden apprehension struck through him and in his confusion he said with more sharpness than he intended, "What are you doing out here, Sis?"

"Trying to enjoy the night. Why, don't I belong here?"

He should have let it go at that. Instead, he gave in to his curiosity. He had to know how long she had been here, what she had seen. "That coyote was prowling around the hen-house again," he said. "So I waited around hoping for a chance at him."

"Then you should have taken the rifle."

Her subtly-barbed words and the indolent way she leaned there against the door frame, arms folded across her breasts, goaded him into saying, "Do I have to answer to you for everything I do?"

"No one said you had to, Thomas."

HE WOULD have gone inside then but for having to pass so close to her. And now he decided he wouldn't need the sheepskin he'd been on the way in to get. He turned back down the steps, keenly aware of her and irrationally resenting her presence, telling himself he didn't give one damn what she had seen.

She let him go three strides down the path before she said, "Tom, I told you Fred was through with Spane."

He stopped, wheeled slowly around. "So you did."

Now that he was sure she knew something he was instantly on the defensive. "He was here for orders," he said. "I told him he was through. He didn't like it much."

"You're sure that's what you told him?"

"What are you trying to say, Lola?" he bridled.

At first he didn't think she was going to answer. But then in a voice toneless with scorn she breathed, "I'm saying that you're

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betraying Fred! I don't know how or why. But that's what I think."

A sudden fury hit him, made him burst out, "This hasn't one damned thing to do with Fred!"

"Hasn't it? Then I suppose it has to do with Kirby."

Her quiet knowing words warned him against giving away too much. "Can I keep Spane from helping himself while Kirby's back is turned?"

She was a long moment saying, "So you're still working off the old grudge."

He knew then that she saw far deeper into him than he had realized, perhaps than he did himself. And all at once he was uncertain, feeling a strange need of her understanding. "Look, Lola," he said pleadingly, "Fred would say this was right. Anything that whittles Kirby down is helping Fred."

"Not if it's done behind Fred's back. And have you forgotten Rita?"

"Leave her out of this!"

"You can't leave her out of it." She stood looking down at his shadowy shape seeming so solid there in the darkness, wishing his nature could measure up to his stature. She was suddenly pitying him, longing to help him. "Tom," she said softly, "why must you always take the easiest way?"

"I don't see what you're getting at."

"Nor do I see what you are. Whatever it is it will only hurt you in the end."

He turned his back to her and took two impatient strides away from the porch. Then he stopped and looked around. "How else can a man like me get anything except by taking it? Tell me! How can he?"

"Tom, I——"

She sensed then how impossible it was to reason with him and her sigh of helplessness and bafflement was eloquent as she said lifelessly, "You'd better go. Fred's probably already there."

She turned then and went inside. Once across the threshold a forlorn hope stopped her and she stood with hands tightly clenched, listening. For many seconds the sound she waited for didn't come. Then abruptly Tom's boots grated against the gravelly path and for the instant she thought he was coming toward the porch that hope in her strengthened.

But then the slur of his steps faded. He had gone down the path and her hope died and she crossed the room and sank wearily onto the settee, trying not to think.

Yet thoughts would come no matter how she fought to banish them and when she caught the sudden hoof-pound of Tom's horse going away at a hard run she could imagine his frame of mind, the fury and the restlessness and the feeling of guilt he was trying to leave behind by outrunning them, by punishing his horse. And in the depths of her despair she faced the bitter certainty that her intuition out there had been a right one. He was betraying Fred, Rita. Worse than that, he was betraying himself.

SOMETHING underhand and treacherous lay behind his association with Spane, yet the realization of this brought no panic in her, no surprise even. Spane was a rustler, so in her groping for an understanding of what Tom's dealings with him might be she could reach only one conclusion. Spane was stealing cattle from Kirby, the cattle Box had thrown onto Stirrup. For hadn't Tom said that what he was doing wouldn't be hurting Fred?

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She could follow the confusing maze of his actions that far but no further. At first she suspected him of some far-sighted but nevertheless futile intrigue. Yet, beyond the immediate goal of running off Kirby's cattle, she saw no ultimate one Tom could be heading for that didn't involve too many improbabilities. He had nothing but the ranch here and the lease—

The lease!

All at once a startling thought struck her. Tom was short of money for stocking the lease. Instead of struggling through two or three years of depending on the normal increase of his small herd adequately to stock the new range he might be making this gamble with Spane for the money that would let him buy the culls from the reservation herd. Only last night he'd been talking about that. She clearly remembered the enigmatic smile he had given when she asked where he would find the money. He had spoken casually of going to the bank and, little as she understood financial matters, she had accepted that as a possibility.

And now as she lay there a vast wave of relief swept over her. The tension and the nerve-strain left her so completely that she felt drowsy, her mind almost at peace. There was a moment's uneasiness over so calmly accepting Tom's dishonest act. But compared to other awesome possibilities she had vaguely feared without being able to name them, his deceit and underhandedness as she saw it now seemed petty, almost trivial.

She was honest enough with herself to admit that she couldn't regret anything Kirby might lose in this. The seeds of animosity and bitterness implanted in childhood by her father had become too deeply rooted to be grubbed out completely by her mature judgment of these later years. Let Kirby have his losses. It didn't matter to her.

Tom's weakness did trouble her. But that was something she lived with perpetually, a thing that she had to make compensations for day in and day out. So she could only hope that whatever he was doing with Spane wouldn't get him into any real trouble.

Now that her mind was at ease, or comparatively so, she thought of going on into her room and to bed. But it was pleasant just to lie here. She reached up finally and pulled the blanket from the back of the settee, covering herself. Then she was almost at once asleep.

Long afterward her deep dreamless slumber was disturbed by the lamp's bright glow and she turned over and away from the glare.

"Time for bed, Sis. It's past two."

She came half awake at the sound of Tom's voice, lifting a hand to shade her eyes as she looked up at him. He was smiling good-naturedly and even though sleep still dulled her thoughts she sensed the oddity of his manner compared to what it had been earlier.

She sat up yawning and stretching. "I was so comfortable."

He sat beside her and reached over to take her chin in his hand and tilt her head so that he could look into her eyes. "The damnedest thing's just happened," he said abruptly.

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His look was so eager, so excitedly secretive that it roused her completely. And now she remembered and asked, "Did you meet Fred?"

He nodded. "Gave him the brown and turned Murchison's nag loose. Sis, are you awake enough to listen to something?"

"Of course."

He couldn't keep the excitement from showing in his dark eyes as he said, "It's something big. Bigger than anything that's ever happened to us!"

She waited for him to go on, trying to hide her misgivings. Then he told her, "Fred's selling us The Springs range!"

"I don't understand."

"He's selling, not leasing!"

He took her hand and squeezed it so tightly that it hurt as he went on, "It was his idea. You could've knocked me over with a broom straw. He needs money to build up his herd. He can't go to the bank for it so I go instead. With a deed on seven thousand acres in our name, yours and mine! Imagine! The thing the old man fought for all his life is handed us on a platter!"

She was having a hard time taking this all in. And now she looked at him carefully, trying to read some deception in his expression. But his straightforward look was without guile and gradually she caught some of his excitement until it made her say, "Tom, it just can't be!"

"I know. It's hard even for me to believe."

He stood up and went to the table to turn down the smoking wick of the lamp. Facing her again his eyes were bright with eagerness. "Here's the way we work it. Tomorrow in town I go to Blanding or Russell, anyone but Keely. Whichever it is gets the legal description on the land and draws up the deed. I take it to Fred to sign, then record it. Next, the bank loans me every dollar the deed's worth. Half that money I turn over to Fred as a beginning payment. Or rather I take it down onto the reservation and spend it on those culls for him, along with my half. So we're both—"

"It is the truth, isn't it?" she interrupted incredulously.

"Gospel, Sis." He held up a hand. "I swear it."

"Then this—then you're through with Spane?"

His expression changed subtly for an instant before he smiled and said in a hearty way, "Forget Spane, Lola. This other's the thing we've been waiting for ever since the day they drove us into these hills."

"I know, Tom. But—"

"But nothing! Sis, we can hold up our heads now."

"I never held mine any other way," Lola said quietly.

Seeing his face at once harden in the way she knew so well, she impulsively leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I'm glad for you, Tom. It really is wonderful." She saw that she had taken the sting from her words and asked, "Where is Fred?"

"Right where he belongs. While he was with me Childers and Hawks were across cutting wire along the west fence. By now the three of 'em are moving all the cattle they can gather right back onto Box."

"And you didn't stay to help?"

"I tried to. Argued my arm off. But Fred wouldn't listen."

"It's best this way, Tom. You're better off away from his trouble."

He sobered. "That's something I don't get. He ropes Hawks and Childers into this, leaves me out."

"But he's not leaving you out of it. He's counting on you more than he is on them. Besides, you'll be seeing him."

"Don't think I won't." He laughed in a way that puzzled her. "Tomorrow I meet him right under Kirby's nose. Within two miles of Box. Remember that ridge to the west of Box where Kirby cut all those ties to sell the railroad?"

"You mean he's going to be there to—"

He nodded, grinning broadly. "Right there. Kirby and Sayers'll be up in the hills, so where could you find a better place? Not that I'd have thought of it."

As they went on talking Lola caught some of his enthusiasm once more and later, when they went to their rooms, she had the feeling that things might not be as bad for Tom as she had supposed.

(*Part III in the next SHORT STORIES*)

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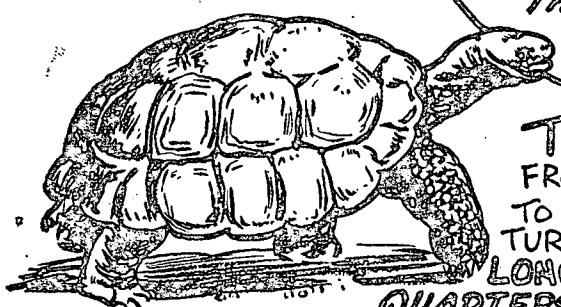
Curioddities By Weill

AT BIRTH THE BLACK BEAR WEIGHS ONLY ABOUT HALF A POUND. THE AVERAGE ADULT MALE BEAR WEIGHS ABOUT 200 POUNDS, BUT THERE IS RECORD OF ONE KILLED IN PENNSYLVANIA WHICH WEIGHED 633 POUNDS, AND WAS 9 FEET LONG.

ONE POUND OF HONEY REQUIRES 20000 TRIPS BY THE BEES TO THE FIELD.

IF JUST ONE APPLE IN A HUNDRED IN A COLD STORAGE CHAMBER IS RIPER THAN THE OTHERS, IT WILL GIVE OFF ENOUGH ETHYLENE GAS TO HASTEN THE RIPENING OF THE REST.



TURTLES VARY IN SIZE FROM A 4 INCH SPECIES TO THE GIANT TRUNK-BACK TURTLE, WHICH IS 8 FEET LONG AND WEIGHS THREE-QUARTERS OF A TON.

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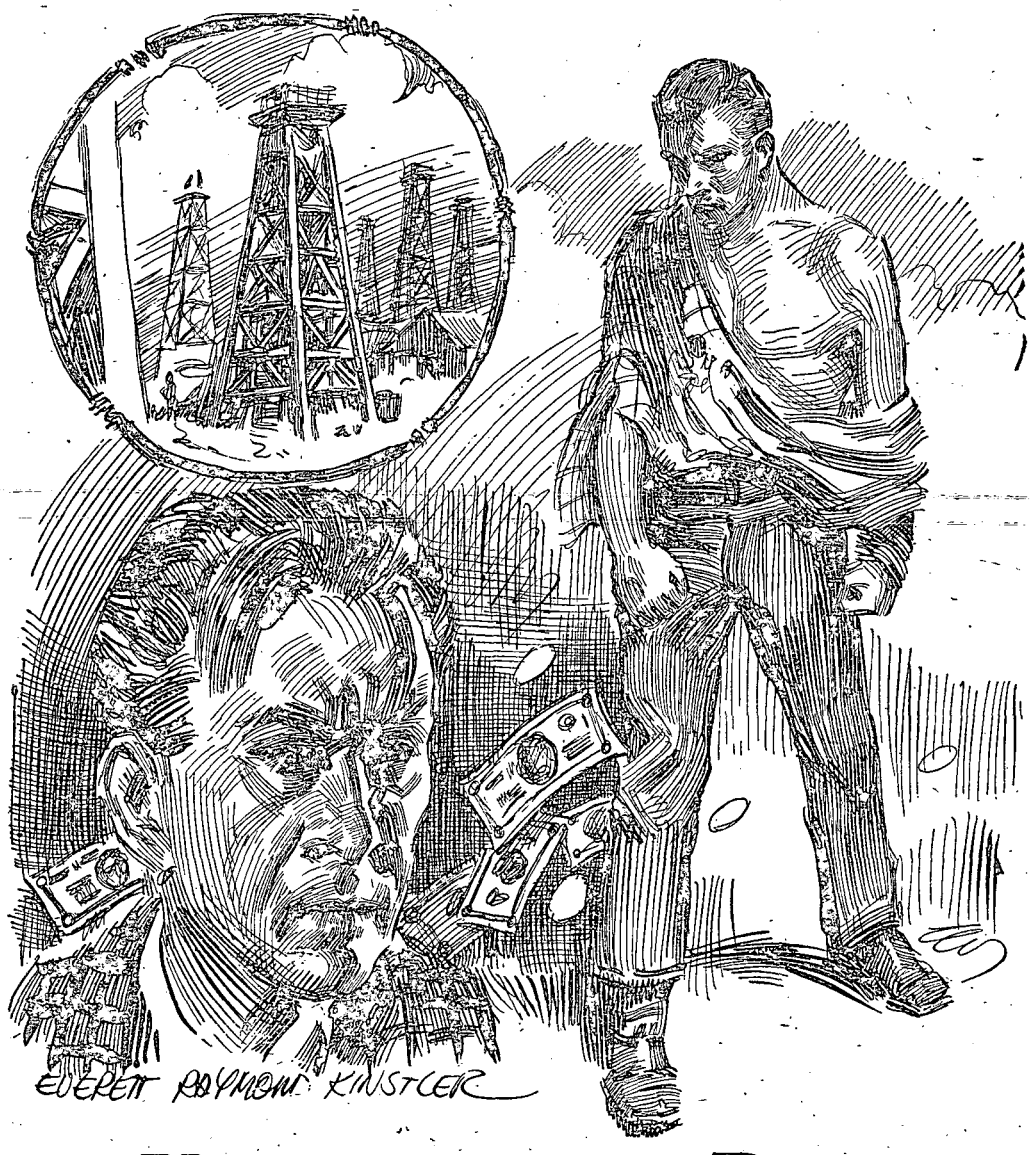
"A Man With a Job Is Always Getting Offers; It's When You Ain't Got One, That No One Comes Around!"



UNCOOPERATIVE DUPE

By RAY PALMER TRACY

IN A BLUE Wyoming sky; the sun was two hours above the eastern horizon. A cool breeze laden with the scent of sage came in from the arid plains. Close in the west, beyond the oil well derricks of Dude Dodsworth's Skinner Creek Oil Lease, light and shadow made the canyons and ridges of the Snowy Range stand out in sharp definition.

Jimmy Martin, the tall, wide, red-headed tooldresser, (morning tower midnight to noon), on well number five, stepped out on

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the casing walk beside the long belt house. He never tired watching the pumping walking beams, lifting and dropping tons of drilling steel. And the trucks roaring around in self-created dust clouds, attending the needs of the drilling wells on the lease, was the kind of music he loved.

As he turned back into the huge, echoing derrick house, Huff Lin, the driller, jerked his balding head toward the bullwheels with the drum of steel drilling cable between them.

"The tools have drilled off and are still dropping good," he said. "I'm going to slip cable through the clamps and drill a few feet more before we bail. Reel off some slack."

"Slack coming up," said Jimmy. He unchained the bullwheels brake lever and threw it back. Laying hold of the hand pegs on the rim of a six-foot bullwheel, he reeled cable off the drum. He was chaining down the brake lever when Dude Dodsworth came in.

The oil operator's smooth manner as much as the expensive whipcords into which he always seemed to have been freshly poured, was responsible for the name Dude. Softness had nothing to do with it. Huff had it right when he said Dude had the hardest iron-hand-in-velvet-glove anywhere in the oil fields. He looked successful and cold-eyed impressive, when he seated himself on the low, square cornered derrick anvil. His gaze followed Jimmy's effortless movements appraisingly.

The operator then began talking in a quiet voice.

"Jimmy," he said, "I hear you've been looking around the country, locating old drilling rigs that can be picked up and put in running order cheap."

There had been no effort on Jimmy's part to conceal his ambition to get an outfit of his own and launch himself as a drilling contractor.

"That's right," he nodded.

"Why don't you save yourself a lot of headaches and stick with some organization already established and work up to a good position?" asked Dude.

The tone was mildly curious, yet there was more behind it than that. Jimmy couldn't have explained it, but something about Dude's manner sounded a warning bell. Picking up a length of old Manila cable, he began unraveling soft rope.

"I'll answer by asking you a question," he said. "Would you rather be a tooldresser or even a toolpusher on this lease than to own it all and be setting where you are now?"

"The conditions were different when I started on my own." Dude's tone cautioned Jimmy not to pry into *his* business.

Jimmy couldn't help asking one more question: "I know the conditions were different then, but what about the *reasons* for going on your own?"

Dude ignored the question. He glanced at his watch and left the derrick house.

Huff who had been studiously paying no attention to the exchange, grinned widely at Jimmy.

"Dude's a good man to work for, but a bad enemy," he commented.

"You advising me not to try to go into business for myself because Dude won't like it?" demanded Jimmy.

"Call it that if you want."

"Bill Maitland has been doing well for himself during the past couple years," pointed out Jimmy. "Dude hates his guts, but Bill is still operating."

"Give Dude time," answered Huff. "Bill's working on shoestring capital. That's dangerous around Dude."

"Dude's got you buffaloed," grinned Jimmy.

"Maybe. I've seen some rugged things happen to good boys who launched out in what Dude considers his private territory." Huff paused and shrugged. "I'm glad I don't want to be an operator. I'll keep plugging along here. Someday I'll get to be toolpusher of a lease. I'm well up on the list now."

Jimmy eyed him curiously. He couldn't imagine a man not wanting to be independent and calling his own shots.

The afternoon tower driller and tooldresser took over at noon. Jimmy ate and drove his jalopy into the battered little town of Blanco to get some shaving cream. Coming out of the drugstore into the warm, sun-drenched street, he met Bill Maitland.

While Bill was not as wide as Jimmy, nor as tall as the tooldresser's six-feet-three, the two men resembled each other in a lean faced, gray eyed way. More especially it was

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something in their manner that bracketed them together.

"I've been intending to come out to the Skinner Creek Lease to see you," Bill greeted. "In a week or so I'm going to start an oil test on the Archer Dome west of here. Would you be interested in a tooldressing job out there?"

Jimmy was flattered by the offer. However, he was in line for the next open drilling job on the Skinner Creek Lease, and wanted to get that experience as quickly as possible. He couldn't see any advantage in making a change at this time.

"Thanks, Bill," he said. "But I've got a tooldressing job."

"I know you have, but this Archer Dome job could lead to the drilling handlebars on the next well," urged Bill.

"I'll think it over and let you know," Jimmy put him off.

"Fair enough," acknowledged Bill and went into the drugstore.

Jimmy headed for where he had parked his car. Del Carter, arms folded, was leaning his huge frame against a fender of the jalopy.

Del was morning tower driller on number four well at the Skinner Creek Lease. He was the real reason Jimmy had gone to work for Dude Dodsworth.

The big driller had no peer as a hole maker, although many operators did not hold him in high esteem otherwise. He was a swaggering bully, and there were those who claimed he was not in any way dependable.

When Jimmy had been fourteen and hanging around the oil fields, he had been as impressed by the fear Del inspired as by his master touch with drilling tools. In his boyish judgment, to be feared was a desirable thing. It forced attention, like thunder.

While Jimmy had outgrown that stage of adolescence by the time he got to dressing tools, he still admired Del's ability as a driller. He had followed him to the Skinner Creek Lease to try and get on with him in the hope of picking up pointers he'd be able to use.

AS JIMMY reached the car, Del's small eyes peering from under bushy, straw-colored brows which gave his heavily boned face a distinctive touch, were focused on the drugstore door.

"What's biting Bill Maitland?" he asked.

Jimmy had noticed that Del seemed to be on good terms with Dude. He saw a chance to let the big boss know that he was popular with other operators.

"Bill wanted me to dress tools on his Archer Dome test," he said.

"So that pussyfooter ain't satisfied to practically lift the Archer Dome right out of Dude's hands," said Del. "He has to bear down and try to hire Dude's help away from him."

"A man with a job is always getting offers," soothed Jimmy. "It's when you ain't got a job that no one comes around."

Del regained his good humor.

"Ain't it the truth?" he grinned and moved off.

Midmorning of the next day, Jimmy was hosing off the muck spilled on the derrick floor from the last bailing. Dude came in again. With him was wiry little Mel Lock who was dressing tools for Del Carter. Lumbering after Mel was a big roustabout named Tip Long.

"Huff," Dude addressed the driller. "I'm making some changes around the lease. Beginning now, you're promoted to be assistant toolpusher."

Huff threw Jimmy a triumphant, I-told-you-so glance. "Thanks a lot, Dude," he beamed.

"Mel Lock steps into your drilling position," Dude went on. "Tip Long will dress tools for him. Jimmy will shift over to number four and dress tools for Del Carter."

Mel had neither Jimmy's experience nor length of service. The injustice of promoting him over his head was more than Jimmy could take. Furiously he peeled off his jumper. Before he could tell Dude to take his job and jump in the sump with it, the operator turned his warmest smile on him.

"Aside from giving you a chance to work with Del Carter as you've been wanting," he said, "I've got another good reason for stepping Mel over your head."

"You ain't talking to me!" snarled Jimmy. He began picking up things that belonged to him.

"Keep your shirt on," advised Dude. "I know as well as you that you're entitled to the job I'm giving Mel."

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"Then why in hell—?" began Jimmy.

"Because Mel's my wife's cousin. That's why," interrupted Dude with fascinating frankness. "I've got to live with my wife, but I don't have to live with you. You get the next drilling assignment. Anyhow, you ought to be glad to work with Del a while and pick up some of his savvy. A man setting up business for himself will need all of that he can get."

Jimmy cooled down. He was not convinced, but realized Dude had talking points. Grumpily he went over to well number four. He found Del in a state of mind that matched his own.

"It's the damndest, lowest down trick I've ever had played on me!" he raved. "Dude just the same as promised me that assistant toolpusher job! Then he gives it to Huff!"

While it was Jimmy's opinion Huff was entitled to the promotion, Del's anger gave him an idea.

"Listen," he said. "Why don't we quit Dude and get a job as a driller-tooldresser team on Bill Maitland's Archer Dome test?"

"I dunno about going that far," Del grew cautious. "I've got a lot of seniority here. Still, if Dude would double-cross me once, he'd do it again. I'll tell you what. I know Bill wants you. If you can whangle a job for both of us, I'll go with you."

Jimmy was still smarting under his unjust treatment when this chance to even the score with Dude by robbing him of his ace driller presented itself. That alone was soothing. But what particularly pleased him was that he could still avail himself of the opportunity to pick up drilling pointers from Del.

The driller-tooldresser team of Del Carter and Jimmy Martin would be a top flight natural. Jimmy had no difficulty in arranging with Bill Maitland for him and Del to take over the morning tower of the test on the Archer Dome.

DUDE was seated at his desk in the Skinner Creek Lease office when Jimmy and Del asked for their time. He drummed on the desk top with heavy finger taps and looked the pair over with cold disapproval.

"You're letting things of no consequence fog up what you call your brains," he accused.

"You mean of no consequence to you," retorted Del.

"Bill Maitland is riding to a fall," Dude went on. "He lacks the capital to chew the bites he's taking. One misstep, or a run of bad luck, and he'll be up Salt Creek without a paddle. When that happens, come back and I'll give you both jobs at the bottom and start you working up again."

"Start us at the bottom of what?" jeered Jimmy. "I couldn't get any lower and still work in a derrick house."

It wasn't long after the *spudding in* of the new well that Jimmy became suspicious that Del Carter was still on the payroll of Dude Dodsworth. Settling down to the long pull, with time to think, he became dubious of the sequence of events, following Bill Maitland's offer of a job, which had landed him and Del on the Archer Dome. They were so apt they hinted of control. He wondered if Dude could be engineering a coup to hang up Bill Maitland's scalp.

"Could be I fell for monkey business," he reflected darkly.

Jimmy decided to watch Del for some sign of disloyalty to Bill. Immediately he gave that up for the present. The objective oil sand of the test lay at a depth of thirty-four hundred feet. If there was a plot to use the test to break Bill, nothing would be done about it until the hole was nearing completion, when Bill's finances would be straining at the seams.

He tried to figure out a method a driller could use to sabotage the test. Nothing occurred to him that wouldn't require the tooldresser as an accomplice. Obviously that was out. Reason told him his fears must be groundless. As though to prove it, the hole went down quietly and efficiently. Yet his suspicions remained fresh and bright as ever.

AS THE well neared completion, Jimmy humored his state of mind. From the time the three thousand foot marking string on the drilling cable disappeared in the hole, he made it a point never to leave Del alone in the derrick house for more than a few moments. It seemed wasted effort. Far as he could see, Del was only interested in doing a workmanlike job.

It was around one o'clock in the morning, the day the thirty-three-hundred foot

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marking string started flirting with the drilling nipple, that Jimmy sensed a tension in Del. He was wondering if it had any significance, when Del suddenly began sniffing the air.

"Well, well," he said. "Smell them new puffs of wet gas."

The tools had been encountering wet gas for the past two hundred feet; a good indication of oil below.

"What's peculiar about 'em?" Jimmy asked.

Del raised his heavy brows.

"You've sniffed so much lately you've blunted your smeller," he suggested affably. "Can't you tell by the smell when production is getting close? And that reminds me. You know that big old braiden Bill trucked out here to screw on top of the casing to control the oil. I noticed the threads are battered. You better go out to the bench with a file and open the threads up. When we're ready for the braiden, we'll want it quick."

Jimmy had examined the threads of the braiden the day it had arrived. None of them was battered then. He had no doubt but what Del had seen to it that they had suffered a recent accident; a neat little trick to get the tooldresser out of the derrick house for an easily calculated length of time.

This was it. Yet there was no proof anyone other than himself could see. He realized it was dangerous to give Del even an end of the rope he was asking for, but could think of no other way to get the goods on him.

"Yes," he agreed, "I better get the braiden in shape to use." He turned his back on Del, strolled out to the casing walk, went down the steps at the end of the engine house and slanted around to the bench which was located halfway between the drilling rig and the field boiler.

Bending over the braiden he examined the threads by the light of a dusty electric light bulb hanging over the bench vice. There were two battered streaks across the threads that looked as though they had been hammered. To age the newness of the marks, grease and dirt had been rubbed on.

Jimmy got a file from the toolbox and went to work. All the time he was counting.

It would take so many seconds for Del to slip down the catwalk in the belt house to a knothole in the engine room siding and check on how his trick was working. So many seconds would be consumed returning to the derrick house and setting about whatever he planned to do to the well.

Jimmy gave the driller all the time he dared. Then he laid down his file and headed for the back door of the engine room. The hum of the engine, the clank of the heavy tools, the creaking of the walking beam and the swaying shadows cast by the strings of electric light bulbs, combined to conceal his movements.

Slipping into the engine room, he ducked into the belt house and ran up the catwalk to the derrick.

Del was not at the drilling handlebars. He was on his knees by the bullwheels brake lever which he had unchained and thrown back. With the weight of the tools hanging on the walking beam, the chaining down of the brake lever was only an added safety measure. Jimmy didn't know exactly what Del was doing, but the intent was plain enough.

He had been right when he saw no way for a driller to sabotage a well without the aid of his tooldresser. What hadn't occurred to him was that it was not necessary for the tooldresser to know he was in the plot until it was too late.

Del was fixing the brake lever connection so the next time his tooldresser tried to catch the weight of the tools, which the driller would make sure were at the top of the hole at the time, the brake would fail. Two tons of slender steel would drop three thousand feet to land in a twisted mass at the bottom of the hole. They would either remain there, plugging the well, or cause such an expensive fishing job it would completely break the owner just as effectively.

The full import of what was being done made Jimmy see red. Not content to merely use him to get Del a job on the test, he was also being framed to aid in its ruin.

"When you get done tinkering with my brake, Del, maybe you'll tell me why you hammered them threads on the braiden!" he suggested with a calm that surprised him.

Del bounded to his feet and whirled around. When he saw Jimmy had stopped the other side of the hole, he relaxed. A

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little smile dented the corners of his heavy mouth.

"For a minute I thought I'd fooled you," he said. "Goes to show how the best of us make mistakes. You're smarter than I figgered. Dude knew. Right at the beginning he said you'd catch up with us." He paused and shrugged. "It don't matter. No harm done."

Jimmy was puzzled. Del wasn't acting the way a guilty man caught red handed should act.

"Funny you were both so dumb you'd try to wreck the well when you knew I'd be watching," he offered.

"Dumb?" Del chuckled. "Not us. You see Dude planned to keep you in his organization. When he found you was fool enough to try and set up business in his territory, he looked around for a way to polish you off. Then Bill Maitland offered you a job. He saw how he could kill two birds with one stone. Dude's sharp that way. He arranged for you to go to work for Bill and take me along."

"Yeah, I know," said Jimmy.

"Sure. Dude said you'd figger it out quick as you got over being mad," agreed Del. "Here's something you don't know. Dude told me to give you a chance to change your mind."

"Mighty white of him. Change my mind about what?"

"About going to work for him. You can either help me plug this hole and fix it to look like an accident, or when you're buried, it'll look like you plugged the hole and got killed in the struggle when I tried to stop you."

Jimmy was one of the few around the oil fields who didn't fear Del. He said, "Suppose it turns out it ain't me that gets killed in the struggle?" He rose on the balls of his feet.

Del's hand dived into his shirt and came out with an automatic.

"Hold it!" The order was harsh and dangerous.

Jimmy dropped back on his heels. Dismay engulfed him. This was another of Dude's ideas. Del, the powerful, swaggering bully, would never think of using a gun to handle him.

"So you're yellow as well as crooked!" he taunted.

The little eyes flamed.

"I'd rather beat you to death than to shoot you, and I could do it just as easy," he said. "Dude wants it done this way."

"You can't get away with murder!"

"Not murder—self-defense," corrected Del. "That is, if you turn down Dude's offer. It's all worked out. Even this gun is registered in your name."

Jimmy almost hurled himself on Del, gun or no gun. What a sucker he had turned out to be! Worse than that, Bill would think he had betrayed him. Sweat started out on his body in icy drops.

"Well?" urged Del, his satisfied smile working again and his little eyes sure.

Jimmy didn't believe even a man like Del would shoot until all hope of any other settlement was past. Even if he had no qualms, dead men are often hard to explain.

"Go ahead and shoot and be damned to you!" he invited. "It'll be murder and guys like you always slip. You all wind up kicking at the end of a rope.

The rage on Del's face indicated that Jimmy had scored.

"Here's one that ain't ending that way!" he denied in a loud tone as though the noise of it was reassuring. "Anyway, there's no hurry. Bill is out of town and won't be back till eight o'clock in the forenoon. The other tower boys are asleep and plenty far out of reach. And remember, if you make me shoot you, you'll be an awful long time dead!"

"Stop preaching! Go ahead and shoot—and hang!"

"I told you I was in no hurry," reminded Del. "I intend to get a little more work out of you first. Throw on the bull ropes. We're going to pull the tools."

Jimmy refused to even look in that direction. He said, "Throw on the bull ropes yourself! This is your party!"

"You've got five seconds!" The gun steadied in Del's hand.

Jimmy saw he had pushed Del into a corner. The driller was in a spot where he either had to shoot or call the whole thing off; and he was in too deep to quit. Slowly Jimmy turned his back and picked up the bull ropes which stretch across the derrick house and serve as a belt from the power to the bullwheels. When the ropes were on, he started for the bullwheels brake lever,

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the next move in the job. That would take him within reach of Del.

"Far enough!" Del stopped him. "Now's a good time for you to get in a little practice with the engine. You pull the tools and unhitch. I'll handle the brake."

Frustrated, Jimmy turned to the engine throttle and took up the slack cable. He released the clamps. Del picked up the weight of the tools on the brake with his left hand. With his right, he held the gun on Jimmy and forced him to complete the unhitching.

Jimmy began pulling the tools. He ran the engine as slow as he could to give himself time to think.

Del was grinning. He thought his tooldresser's nerve was throwing in the towel.

The socket and jars of the tools appeared.

"Stop it!" ordered Del.

Jimmy caught the weight on the driller's friction brake.

"You're the driller and bossing the job," taunted Del. "What you want to do next? Shall we fix the brake so it will drop the tools and both of us swear it was an accident? Or shall I drop you and fix things to look the way they'll get by best?"

"How do I know you wouldn't kill me anyhow, to shut my mouth?" asked Jimmy.

"You'll promise to keep a still tongue, and you're the kind of sap who'll do it," explained Del, now sure Jimmy was weakening.

A red haze obscured Del for a minute while Jimmy fought for control. Was there nothing that Dude and Del didn't know about him?

"Go ahead and shoot and get it over with!" he gritted. At the moment he was so disgusted he would have welcomed a bullet.

"I need a little more help," prodded Del, certain he had his tooldresser where he wanted him. "I'm going to try a new wrinkle I just thought up. Notice I've put the bullwheels lever back? You get the axe over in the corner and cut the bullwheel ropes. That will release the tools from the friction brake without the driller touching it. It'll be a real tooldresser trick! Slick, huh?"

DEL was so pleased with his cleverness, he didn't realize he was giving Jimmy a chance. It wasn't much of an opportunity, but such as it was, Jimmy recognized it and knew it was the only one he'd get. With a show of extreme unwillingness he got the axe and approached the taut bull ropes. He turned his head to check on Del's position.

"Where you want 'em cut?" he covered his act.

"Stop stalling! I'm getting fed up!" snapped Del.

Jimmy raised the axe. Then, with a swift side step he spun on the ball of his left foot. The heavy bladed axe flashed across the derrick house, straight for Del's head. At the same time, Jimmy dove low and hard for the big driller.

Del cursed and dodged the axe. He had no chance to fire. Jimmy was on him like a great cat. Down they went to the floor, grappled in a life and death struggle.

Jimmy's big hand closed around the gun in an iron grip, effectually blocking the mechanism so it could not be worked.

"Always the fool!" grunted Del. "Dying with a bullet through the head is easier than being choked to death!" Confidently he heaved to toss Jimmy clear.

Jimmy didn't budge. Instead he swung his free fist with a sledge-like blow that barely missed knocking Del out. The driller was forced to grab the hand to save himself.

Locked together, they rolled and strained on the wet, slippery planks. Jimmy's superior agility offsetting Del's greater weight, they fought on even terms.

Ten years ago Del would have been a match for a man like Jimmy. But youth was on Jimmy's side, and he had the added incentives of fighting for his life and to save Bill Maitland's well.

The battle raged with increasing fury. The first indication Jimmy had of how the tide was turning was Del's whistling breath. Then there was a touch of panic in the desperate efforts he was making to wrench his gun free. But the grip Jimmy had developed on the handle of a sixteen-pound sledge never faltered. It was like a bolted-on clamp.

Del started rolling along the floor, carrying Jimmy with him. Jimmy saw no point to it. He only resisted enough to force Del into expending more of his fading strength. Almost too late he learned Del had a cunning plan. A slight miscalculation in distance on the last roll was all that saved

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Jimmy from getting his head banged on the anvil.

The driller made another frantic effort. Instead of resisting, Jimmy heaved with him and thrust himself upward. His head shot over the target. Bending his long right leg he brought his knee up hard under Del's chin. It was the driller's head that thudded on the steel.

Del went limp. His grip on the gun relaxed and dropped away. He rolled on his back, knocked out for the first time in his life.

AT EIGHT o'clock, Bill Maitland came in the derrick house. Astonishment spread over his rugged features as he saw Jimmy at the drilling handlebars, and with a gun stuck in the waistband of his overalls. Then his stunned gaze went to Del Carter who was seated on the floor, his back to the anvil, and with his hands and feet securely bound with soft rope.

"I had to get rough with Dude Dodsworth's hired hand," explained Jimmy. "He tried to do you dirt. To keep him out of mischief, I took his gun away from him and tied him up."

The implication that Jimmy was the better man was like gall to the driller.

"That's a damned lie!" he roared. "A few minutes ago, Jimmy sneaked up behind me and knocked me cold! He was going to wreck the well and lay it on me, only you got here too quick for him!"

Bill eyed Del with a skeptical smile. Then he turned to Jimmy. "What's the story?" he asked.

Jimmy told Bill what had happened from the beginning. After each detail, Del roared invective and counter charges.

Neither Jimmy nor Bill paid the driller more attention than they would have given any other noisy nuisance.

"If you've got any doubts," concluded Jimmy, "take notice that the drill is on the caprock and still going down. Step up close and listen to the rumble of the pressure just a-waiting. Before night you'll see oil shoot right over the crownblocks."

"Yes, I figger oil is about a sure thing," said Bill. "As for Del, I've known him for a long time. I ought to have known better than to take him on straight from Dude. Come to think of it I must have expected you to keep him in line. At least I didn't make any mistake asking you to work for me."

"I ain't bragging," grinned Jimmy. "It was a mighty tight squeak."

"What'll we do with him?" asked Bill.

"You won't do a thing with me!" Del answered, savagely. "All you can do is turn me loose!"

"He's right," agreed Jimmy. "We know about him, but we couldn't prove a thing to a jury. But why worry? Del will have to report his failure to Dude. If I know anything about Dude that will be punishment enough."

"Beat jail all out, "agreed Bill. "Now where do you get off? Of course you can have a job with me as long as I'm running a string of tools. That would be a small reward for saving this test. Anything in particular I can do for you?"

Jimmy hesitated. What he had in mind seemed a little like asking pay for doing his duty. Yet it wasn't really. He said, "A man has to do business with his friends. His enemies won't have a thing to do with him. I'm buying a drilling outfit to go on my own. I'd like a contract with you to help drill up the Archer Dome."

"I should have started on my own when I was your age instead of waiting ten years," approved Bill. "Consider the contract as good as signed and in your pocket. We'll work out the details later."

Jimmy turned and studied the chagrin and fury Del was vainly trying to conceal. Then he laughed aloud.

"When you report to Dude, tell him about my contract," he requested. "It ought to go over as big as you falling down on wrecking the test so Dude could pick up the pieces. Oh, yes. Please thank Dude for the gun he had registered in my name and sent over by you." He walked over and began untying the furious driller.

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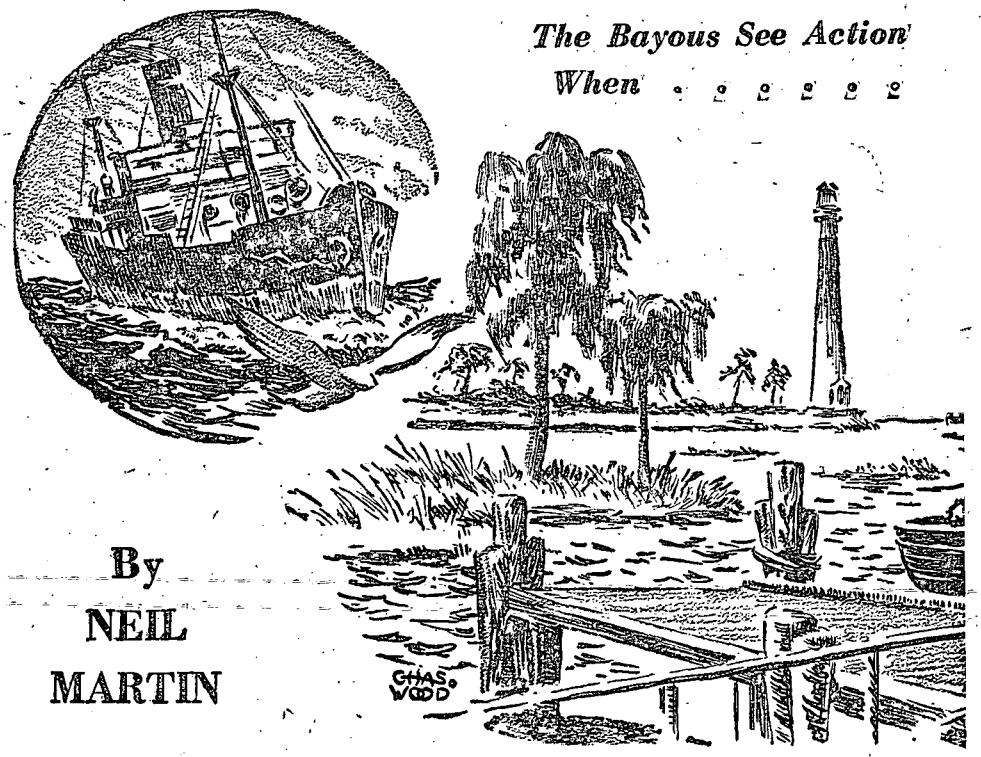
The Bayous See Action When . . . . . .



By NEIL MARTIN

MURDER GOES OFFSHORE

HENRY POU started awake, glanced at the little clock on his desk and yawned. Five o'clock, he reflected drowsily; two more hours to go before his own day shift began. Since Friday night was Jimmy Bourdelon's weekly lay-off, it meant that Henry would have to stay on the job until seven o'clock that evening.

Vaguely aware that something had disturbed his nap, Henry sat erect in his creaky swivel chair and looked about the little whitewashed room which served St. Odile as police headquarters. His sleepy gaze passed over the dilapidated furnishings until it came to rest upon the enamelled coffee dripper set upon the gas heater against the inner wall. Rising, he walked to the filing cabinet, took out a heavy china cup and filled it with thick, black coffee. Then he moved to the door, opened it and looked out over the business district of the little South Louisiana town.

A thick blanket of fog lay over St. Odile. The dripping trees along Main Street, the buildings, the drawbridge spanning Bayou Papillon at the foot of the short thoroughfare, all seemed blurred and indistinct, as if he were seeing them through a sheet of ground glass. A pre-dawn chill was in the air, laden with the salt tang of the Gulf, blended with the ever-present odor of decaying vegetation.

Henry stood in the doorway, with the fog swirling about him, a short, barrel-chested man, with a sweeping handlebar mustache falling in hirsute cataracts on either side of a chin that vaguely suggested a clenched fist. He sipped his coffee and peered into the mist, his black brows puckered in a frown of worry. Something, he was certain, had jarred him awake.

"I'd better make the rounds," he decided. "Someone might have been doing a breaking and entering job. Anyway, I need the exercise."

Suddenly the little room echoed to the jangle of the telephone. Hastily closing the

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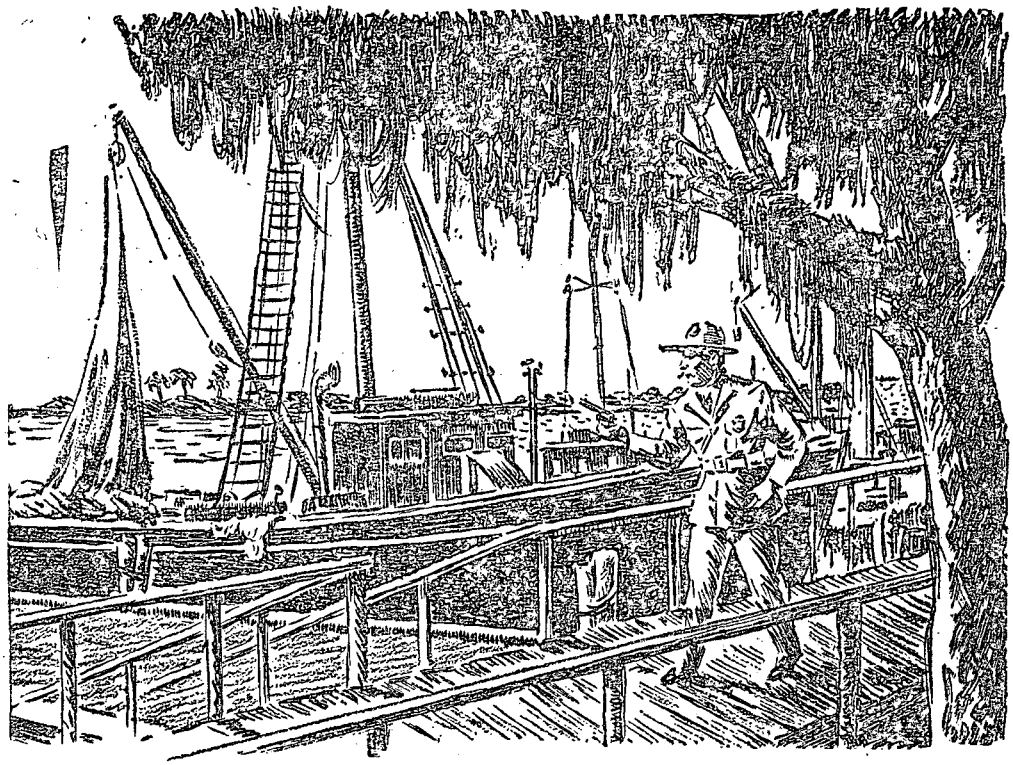

door, Henry turned back to his desk, set down his cup and lifted the receiver.

"Po-lice, yes?" he drawled.

"What was all the shooting about?" an excited female voice inquired in French.

"Shooting?" Henry repeated drowsily. "*Mais non.* Obviously some joker setting off firecrackers." That, he thought, was a logical answer, since it was Christmas week, a season in the Deep South when firecrackers are as important as is either holly or mistletoe.

"At five o'clock in the morning?" the woman exclaimed angrily. "Are you out of your mind? Listen to me; that noise sounded like a machine gun and came from somewhere along bayou road. You'd better get down there and investigate. What are we paying taxes for?"

"All right," Henry grunted. "I'll look into the matter at once." He slammed down the receiver and muttered in English. "Those dam' taxpayer', they give me a pain in ma neck. Yes."

He picked up his coffee cup and emptied it at a draught. Perhaps, he thought, the lady taxpayer had been right. Not even the most enthusiastic Christmas celebrant would be discharging firecrackers at five o'clock in the morning.

Returning the empty cup to the filing cabinet, he put on his rubber raincoat, clapped his ten-gallon hat on his head and hurried from the room. As he locked the green door marked "Police Headquarters," the crow of a rooster came from somewhere across the bayou like a distant bugle call.

He hurried down Main Street under the dripping trees and halted on the corner of the bayou road, looking south along the waterfront. Nothing moved there. The gangway lights of a few vessels moored along the batture glowed dimly through the fog. But everything seemed quiet. Unhooking the flashlight from his belt, he switched it on, crossed the street to the levee and followed a winding path among tiers of oil-well casing, crates of machine parts and stacks of lumber, pausing at intervals to sweep a beam of light over the deck of a vessel. Reaching Abadie's boat yard, four blocks from Main Street, he halted again and peered through the mist toward the shanty-boat colony moored against the batture above Pointe Derniere. Not even a light showed there.

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"One suspects that the lady taxpayer must have eaten too much bouillabaise for supper," he reflected as he turned back toward town.

HE CROSSED the bayou road and walked slowly toward Main Street, shining his light before him on the uneven brick pavement. Reaching the service alley which ran behind the business block on the south side of the main thoroughfare, he halted again and swore softly.

There, sprawled on the brick pavement, his head in a pool of blood, was the body of a man, the light from Henry's torch forming an oval halo about him.

"Ha!" Henry murmured. "So the lady taxpayer was right."

For several minutes, he stood there, silently staring at the inert figure, which was clad in grimy dungaree jumper and trousers and ragged, rubber-soled canvas shoes. A dusty black hat lay a few feet away. Beyond the hat an automatic pistol glimmered dully in the light of Henry's torch.

Kneeling, Henry gently turned the body on its back, emitting a grunt of incredulous surprise when he saw the dead man's wrinkled, bearded face.

"John—ee Garcon!" he muttered. "It isn't right. He was just a harmless old one. Yes."

He stared down into the upturned face of the dead man, whose real name was Jean Duson, a local character who made his living by catching crabs from a leaky twelve-foot skiff. Because of his willingness to do odd jobs for the housewives around town, he had acquired the nickname of Johnny Garcon. Now he was dead, shot through the head, and thereby acquiring an importance which he had never enjoyed in life.

Rising from his knees, Henry stepped over to the pistol, inserted a pencil in the muzzle and lifted it from the ground.

"Thirty-eight caliber," he mused, sniffing at the muzzle. "Recently fired, too. Well, we'll know more about this bye and bye."

He looked up the alley to where a rectangle of light slanted through the rear doorway of Wilkes' undertaking establishment. Carrying the gun impaled on his pencil, Henry hurried toward the lighted doorway, which opened to the workroom. In the office, he found Falgout, the night attendant, asleep with his feet on the desk.

"Eh, man!" Henry shook him, "Wak' up!" As the other opened his eyes, Henry asked, "How come you don't hear all that shooting, ma frien'?"

"Shootin'?" Falgout rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Some dope lettin' off firecrackers. Yes."

"Somebody done shot po' ol' John-ee Garcon," Henry explained, reaching for the telephone. "Hello! Give me Number Twenty-seven."

Presently a sleepy voice responded, "Dr. Couriere?"

"Henry Pou, Doc. Look, somebody done shot ol' John-ee Garcon. He's laying at the foot of the alley, him. You come look at him now, yes?"

The doctor, who doubled in brass as deputy coroner for the southernmost beat of Papillon Parish, yawned sleepily. "I suppose so. So someone shot old Johnny Garcon, eh? Probably mistook him for a burglar." He yawned again and added, "I'll be right over."

Henry replaced the telephone and hurried back down the alley, accompanied by Falgout. As they halted beside the body, the undertaker's man remarked:

"Sorta crank, wasn't he? Uster prowl about a lot at night."

Henry nodded. "Thass right. When I firs' join the po-lice, I figured him fo' a peeper and ran him in for' night prowling. But the mayor turned him loose the nex' mo'ning, an tol' me to lay off him, claimed he was harmless."

He turned as a black coupe swung around the corner from Main Street and came to a chattering stop at the mouth of the alley. Dr. Couriere climbed out of his car, carrying his little black bag. He was short and portly, with a neatly trimmed vandyke beard, and wore an overcoat over his pajamas. Squatting on his heels beside the body, he peered through his thick-lensed glasses at the bullet wound above the dead man's ear and clicked his teeth.

"Shine your light, Henry," he ordered. Opening his bag, he took out a slender probe and inserted it in the wound. "Odd," he muttered. "The bullet just penetrated the skin and buried itself in the bony structure.

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Ah! Here it is." He took a pair of forceps from his bag and picked up a heavy bullet. "A forty-five. Obviously fired from an automatic." He wiped the slug on the dead man's shirt and passed it to Henry.

"How come he's daid, him," Henry asked, "if that bullet didn't enter into his brain?"

"Shock—equivalent to being hit with a heavy hammer behind the ear," the doctor explained. He went through the dead man's pockets and brought forth a switch-blade knife, a soggy plug of chewing tobacco, a large cork in which were inserted half a dozen fish hooks, and seventy cents in dimes and nickels."

"Who'd want to shoot the poor old dope?" Couriere wondered as he placed the dead man's belongings in a manila envelope. "Certainly, he wasn't murdered for his money."

"He might have bin shooting it out wit' somebody else," Henry declared, then went on to tell about the .38 caliber automatic. "That wan, he may not have bin as harmless as he appeared to be."

"You might have something there, Henry," Dr. Couriere conceded. He rose and buttoned his overcoat. "Well, he's all yours now." He picked up his bag, climbed into his car and drove off.

HENRY turned to Falgolt. "Go get the wagon."

"Hell!" the other protested. "The battery's weak, an' we gotta wind her up lak' a dollar watch. What's the matter wit' carryin' him?"

"Hokay," Henry surrendered, taking the dead man's feet. "Less go."

They carried the body up the alley to the workroom of the undertaking establishment and laid it on a zinc-covered table. As Falgout began removing the dead man's clothing, he remarked:

"Reckon we'll have to bill the town for this job. Ain't likely a poor ol' bum lak' Johnny would have anything put by fo' burial expenses."

"Don't you worry yo'self none about that," Henry drawled. "Me, I'll see that John-ee, he gets put away decent." He moved on to the office and lifted the automatic from the desk, then came back to the workroom and showed it to Falgout. "Ever see this gun befo'?"

Falgout stared at the weapon. "Hell, no! You had it when you woke me up. Where you get it?"

"I found it in the alley close to where John-ee was lying," Henry explained. "I'll need to get you' fingerprints. Any objection?"

"None at all," the other agreed. "You figure I might have shot Johnny in mistake for a burglar. Well, you can jus' fo'get it. I didn't know Johnny was daid until you tol' me. See?"

"I see well enough," Henry said, "But I gotta consider all angles." He turned toward the front of the building. "I'll have Jimmy ta' yo' prints when he comes in after breakfas'. Now I'm going on over to the office."

Carrying the gun impaled on his pencil, he crossed the street to the town hall and unlocked the green door. As he entered, the telephone jangled. Laying the weapon on his desk, he picked up the receiver. "Po-lice, yes?" he responded.

"Someone stole my car," an excited male voice announced. "I always park it against the banquette in front of my house. It's gone."

HENRY held the telephone at arm's length and stared at it. He had a feeling that he was being told something far more important than the theft of a car.

"So?" he drawled. "You lef' yo' key in the ignition, too, I reckon, me."

"Whatinhell's that gotta do with my car bein' swiped?" the other bellowed. "My car's gone. I gotta have it to go back an' forth to work in Sellierville."

"Thass mos' onfortunate," Henry sympathized. "But car owners have bin warn' never to leave their keys in the ignition, and to lock up their cars at night. Now give me yo' name and the make, model, license and engine numbers."

"I'm Jules Letaigne," the caller declared. "The car's a Chevvy sedan, Thirty-four model. License number: 2276034. Motor number: 7495320."

Henry jotted down the information on the telephone pad. "Hokay, I'll notify the highway patrol right away."

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"I want action, see?" Letaigne bellowed. "That's what I pay taxes for."

"Hokay," Henry drawled. "So you pay the tax. Also, you get in ma hair. Yes."

He slammed the telephone angrily back on its cradle and sat down behind his desk. Pushing back his hat, he rubbed his forehead. Troubles, he reflected gloomily, never came singly. It was bad enough to have the murder of Johnny Garcon to solve without the additional worry of someone's missing junkheap. He looked at the desk clock and noted with a start that the hands pointed to six-fifteen. Lifting the telephone, he called long distance and asked to be connected with the Sellierville office of the State Highway Patrol.

"Hello?" someone responded at the Sellierville end of the line. "What's on your mind, Henry?"

"A taxpayer's car has bin stolen," Henry declared. "He described the car, gave the license and motor numbers and concluded, "You have you' bright young man keep a sharp lookout for that wan, yes?"

"Oh, sure, Henry. By the way, a car answering that description has been parked across Courthouse Square, near the bus station, for the past half hour. Hold the line while I take a look at it."

Henry put his feet on the desk and lolled in his chair until the highway patrolman returned to the telephone. "That's the car you want, all right," the state officer reported. "But it's got blood all over the upholstery back of the driver's seat. Know anything about that?"

"No—but I can guess," Henry said. He told of the shooting of Johnny Garcon and of his discovery of the .38 caliber automatic a few feet from the body. "Thass all I can tell you until we get us some fingerprints. *Au 'voir!*" He cradled the telephone and stared reflectively at the ink-stained blotter.

Events, he thought, were piling up fast. First, Johnny Garcon, with a forty-five caliber bullet embedded in his skull, and a thirty-eight caliber automatic lying only a few feet from his outflung right hand. Next, a complaint about a stolen car. Now the discovery of the same car with blood on the upholstery behind the driver's seat. What, he wondered, would come next.

He rose, poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down again. Through the open door he watched the first bus of the day arrive from Sellierville, roll up Main Street to the town hall, then turn and run back to its regular stop in front of Brossin's Drug Store. The driver dumped off a bundle of newspapers. Half a dozen passengers who worked in the parish seat climbed on board. Then the big bus rolled out of town. Henry sipped his coffee and waited impatiently for his morning paper to be delivered.

WHEN a boy on a bicycle tossed a copy of the *Picayune* through the doorway, Henry refilled his coffee cup, lighted a stogie and sat down again for an hour of solid reading. Outside, the early morning sunlight was struggling through the fog. Storekeepers began to open their establishments. From across the bayou there came the shriek of the cannery whistle summoning the workers to the processing tables. Henry read on, the smoke from his stogie hovering like a blue cloud against the whitewashed ceiling. He reached the comic section and was absorbed in the adventures of his favorite character when the telephone rang. Sighing, he laid aside his paper and lifted the receiver.

"Go ahead, Sellierville," he heard the operator say. Then a peculiar whistling buzz in the receiver announced that Albert Fontenette, district attorney for Papillon Parish, was speaking.

"Henri," the D. A. was saying in French, his loosely fitting dentures clacking loudly in the receiver, "what in the name of ten thousand devils has been going on in St. Odile last night?"

When Henry told him, Fontenette buzzed, "Dr. Felix Mabot called this office awhile ago and reported that a strange man had entered his home, threatened him with a pistol and forced him to dress a bullet wound in his left shoulder. Before leaving the doctor's house, the fellow tore the telephone box loose from the wall and threatened to have his pals kill Mabot if he reported the incident. He also forced the doctor to give him a clean shirt and coat."

Henry stared at the blotter, in his mind's eye a picture of the man at the other end of the wire—Albert Fontenette, short and dap-

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per, with a sallow, wrinkled face topped with a mop of snowy, wind-blown hair which made his head look like a ripening cotton boll. Henry wondered now why the D. A. had bothered to call him, since happenings in Sellierville came under the jurisdiction of Vince Cartier, the chief of police.

"Why bother me about that, Albair?" Henry protested mildly. "I have enough on my hands. Is Vince Cartier, or Vicou, making any effort to catch that one?"

"The sheriff learned that the man left on the first bus north," Fontenette revealed. "Ostensibly, the fellow was headed for New Orleans. But there are several places where he could get off the bus and continue on to the city by taxi. I fear we'll never lay hands on him now. We've notified the New Orleans police, however."

"Could Dr. Mabot describe the man?" Henry asked.

"Yes; he described him as being rather lightly built—about five three or four, and weighing about one twenty-five. Brown hair and eyes. Just one little man among millions of little men."

"He has a bullet wound in his left shoulder," Henry pointed out. "That will set him apart from all the other millions of little men. Well, perhaps I can tell you more when Jimmy comes down and takes some fingerprints. Meanwhile, you'd better have some of Vicou's bright young men go over that car for fingerprints. Until then, *au 'voir!*"

He cradled the telephone and looked up as a tall, rangy young man entered, walking with a slight limp, "Ha, Jimmy! I jus' bin thinking about you. Yes."

"I heard you," Jimmy Bourdelon declared. "What in heck's been going on?"

WHEN Henry told him, the junior member of St. Odile's two-man police force pulled up a chair and sat down beside the desk, his lean face expressionless. "I don't get it," he declared. "From what you told me, it looks as if old Johnny Garcon engaged in a gun battle with someone else. That doesn't sound at all like Johnny."

Henry pursed his lips and lifted his shoulders level with his ears in a shrug. "Thass the way she looks at this moment. On the surface, it seems lak' John-ee Garcon and some feller shoots it out over in the alley. The other feller gets him a bullet in the shoulder. But he puts a slug in John-ee's haid, him. He's scare' to go to a doctor here in town, so he steals that old' Chevvy of Jules Letaigne, drive to Sellierville and fo'ces Dr. Mabot at gun point to feex him up. But we know fo' certain when you get some fingerprints. You might also give John-ee the paraffin test, jus' to see if he fire' that thirty-eight automatic."

The young ex-Marine rose and took his fingerprinting outfit from a desk drawer. Laying the automatic on a sheet of paper, he dusted it with white powder and then scrutinized the weapon through a jeweler's loop.

"It's lousy with prints," he announced finally. "They're all the same pattern, too—tented arch."

He took his camera from the filing cabinet, affixed a flash bulb and made an exposure of the gun. Laying aside the camera, he slipped the magazine from the weapon, dusted the cartridges and then examined them with his magnifying glass.

"Three shots fired from the gun," he declared. "Forefinger and thumb print on each of the remaining loads. Same pattern as those on the gun."

"Pretty soon now," Henry remarked, "we begin to get some place. Yes."

He looked up as a man barged through the doorway, pulled up before the desk and sank breathlessly into a chair.

"*Ma foi!*" Henry exclaimed wonderingly. "W'at fo' you run lak' that, Doug. You know it ain't good."

Douglas Wilkes put his right hand over his heart and panted:

"I know—shouldn't run—bad for the ol' ticker—"

Henry waited for him to continue, while he ran a contemplative eye over Mr. Wilkes' colorful raiment. Doug Wilkes was an undertaker who tried to look like something else. Just then, his loudly checked suit, his white and purple striped shirt, his green and yellow cravat, impaled with a golden horseshoe pin, and his glaring yellow shoes made him look like the Hollywood conception of a successful bookie.

"Well, Doug?" Henry encouraged. "How come you are so excite'?"

Mr. Wilkes raked the fingers of his right

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hand through his oily black hair and glared at Henry. "You'd be excited, too," he panted, "if you'd just discovered a strange cadiver in your dead wagon."

HENRY'S swivel chair creaked loudly as he hitched himself forward and stared across the desk at the panting mortician. "Wass that you say?" he barked.

"I said there's a strange cadiver in my dead wagon," Mr. Wilkes declared loudly. "A man, dead as Ptolemy. Shot all to hell-angone. And my wagon!" He threw up his hands. "Brother, what a mess! Blood all over the inside."

"Hokay," Henry drawled, "less go and see w'at that wan he's look lak'." He put on his hat and followed Wilkes to the street. Jimmy, with his usual unhurried manner, waited to lock the gun and his fingerprinting gear in the desk drawer before following.

The undertaker barged ahead of Henry through the office of his establishment, the walls of which were tastefully decorated with photographs of burial vaults, grave markers and caskets. He plunged on through the workroom, with Henry close behind him, and through the rear doorway to the alley. The covered delivery truck which served Wilkes as a dead wagon stood to one side of the doorway, its rear doors swinging open. Beside it stood Falgout and the driver, a long wicker basket on the ground between them, both of them staring inside the wagon, where the body of a man lay on his side in a pool of congealing blood.

"Nom d'un tortue!" Henry muttered. Glancing through the doorway, he saw Jimmy coming through the workroom. "Call Doc Couriere, Jimmy."

Turning to Falgout, he inquired "How come y'all didn't fin' that wan befo' now?"

"We mos' generally leave the wagon doors open at night, so the inside'll air out," Falgout explained. "Seems lak' nobody notice the doors bein' shut ontil we got a call to pick up a subject—it was ol' Madame Tessier. She died las' night. Well, as I was sayin' we open the doors an' start to slide in the basket, when we see him lyin' there."

"From the look of that blood," Henry said, "he mus' have bin layin' in there fo' hours." He turned as Jimmy came through the rear doorway and announced that the coroner was on his way over.

The young ex-Marine walked around to the back of the wagon and stared for several minutes at the body. Presently, he said: "This is a new wrinkle—planting a stiff in an undertaker's dead wagon."

Pettijean, the driver, grinned. "Mebbe it was somebody's idea of service," he suggested.

Henry frowned. "That ain't fonny. Murder, she ain't never a joking matter." He looked at the body and continued, "That wan, he was not shove' in there. He climb in. If he had bin shove' in, that tarpaulin on the flo' would have binn all wrinkle'. Y'all can see it's puffeckly smooth."

Jimmy said, "He may have been running from someone else, saw the doors of the wagon open and climbed inside to hide."

Dr. Couriere's coupe came to a stop in front. He came through the workroom, his eyes glinting through the lenses of his spectacles.

"Two within two hours!" he snapped, glaring at Wilkes. "Dammit, that's too much!"

"Don't look at me like that, Doc," the undertaker protested loudly. "I didn't have anything to do with it."

The deputy coroner shrugged, glanced at the body and snapped:

"Take him inside. Do you expect me to climb in there with him?"

The undertaker's men dragged out the tarpaulin and, with it, the body. When the corpse was carried inside and laid on a table, the doctor ordered the clothing removed. The body was disrobed and turned face downward on the table, revealing a line of evenly spaced bullet holes strung diagonally across the dead man's back, from his left hip to his right shoulder.

Jimmy looked at Henry and muttered, "Machine gun."

Dr. Couriere removed his coat, put on a rubber apron and worked his hands into a pair of rubber gloves. Taking a probe from his bag, he inserted it in one of the bullet holes, shook his head and probed the other wounds.

"Penetration isn't deep," he declared. "None of these wounds would have been fatal if they had been attended to at once.

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This fellow just bled to death." He turned his head and glared at Wilkes. "How the devil did he happen to be, inside your wagon?"

"How the hell do I know?" Wilkes bellowed. "All I know he was there when the boys started to get the wagon ready for a case." He rolled his eyes at the ceiling and groaned, "This shouldn't happen to a dog!"

Couriere grunted and went to work with his probe. Presently, he walked to the sink in the corner, washed off a handful of bullets and handed them to Jimmy.

"None of these was more than an inch or two under the skin," he said, adding, "evidently the gun was fired from some distance." He lifted the dead man's right hand and stared at his palm. "Any of you know him?"

Falgout said, "I've seen him around the Red Onion, Placide Boisson's joint. I think he's an oil-field hand."

The doctor began peeling off his gloves. "No oil-field worker ever had hands as smooth as this fellow's," he argued. "Most likely, he was a tin-horn gambler. I'll conduct the inquest at ten. See if you can dig up some identity by then." He bundled his rubber apron and gloves into his bag, put on his coat and departed.

HENRY and Jimmy emptied the pockets of the dead man's blood-soaked clothing. The inside coat pocket held a tan leather wallet containing thirty-eight dollars, a post office box key and a New Orleans driver's license issued to one Jeff Berdell, of 2805 Peter Street. On the inner side of the wallet, written in indelible pencil, was the notation: "A-1—6-4290 Thielson."

"That," Henry said, "could be a telephone number—'Tackapaw 164290. W'at you got?"

"A penknife, imitation pearl handle," Jimmy told him. "Sixty-five cents in change, a book of paper matches and a pack of Humps."

Henry pursed his lips. "Ain't much to go on," he said. "If that scribbling inside the wallet is a phone number, it might give us a lead."

"Better let me try it," Jimmy suggested. Grinning, he added, "The late M'sieu' Berdell may not have had an accent. You stay here and listen in on the extension." He walked through the workroom to Wilkes' office.

Henry sat in a chair beside the telephone in the workroom and lifted the receiver. He heard Jimmy tell the local operator:

"I want New Orleans, Atakappa 164290. You can say the call is being made by Mr. Jeff Berdell. But charge it to the police account."

"O'kay," the operator said. "I'll ring you when the connection is made."

Henry lit a stogie and waited until the call came. When he again put the receiver to his ear, he heard a shrill female voice inquire:

"What's the matter, Jeff?"

"Nothing," Henry heard Jimmy say. "Where's Thielson?"

"Max is aboard the *Daphne*," the woman declared. "He's waiting for you to call him as soon as they pull out. That is, you call me and I call him out at West End. Have they left yet?"

"Not yet," Jimmy said.

"It's about time they got started," the woman complained. "When you called Thursday night and said they'd gassed up their boat, Max figured they would start out Friday morning." She added hopefully, "Maybe they're waiting until Sunday."

"That's about the size of it," Jimmy agreed.

"Well, Max has the *Daphne* all ready to make the run down to the Passes. He and Abe and Lefty are sleeping aboard, ready to start out the minute your call comes through. Say, what did you call about, anyway?"

"I'm runnin' short of dough," Jimmy explained.

"Oh, I see. Well, I'll telegraph you fifty. You should get it some time today. That be all right?"

"That'll be fine," Jimmy agreed. "Well, my time is about up. So long!" He cradled the telephone and came back to Henry.

"How did I do?" he asked.

"Hokay," Henry declared. "From w'at I heard, I gather that this wan was spying on some boat, with instructions to phone Thielson when it pulled out."

Jimmy sat down in another chair and lighted a cigarette. "Indications are," he said slowly, "that someone on the boat got

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tired of being spied on and rubbed Berdell out with a machine gun. Looks like gang business to me."

"Gang beezness, yes?" Henry toyed with his handlebar mustache and stared thoughtfully at the dead man. "All that talk about Thielson aiming to meet some boat off the Passes suggest' we may be getting into some-t'ing beeg-beeg. Yes."

"Your friend, Corrigan, might be able to give us some dope on Thielson," Jimmy suggested.

"Right now," Henry demurred, "the G-men might not know any more about that Thielson than we do. But the N'Awlyins cops might know a lot. Less go over to the office."

THEY left the undertaking establishment and crossed the street to police headquarters. Henry went behind his desk and put in a call to New Orleans. When the connection was made, he told the New Orleans identification officer:

"This Henry Pou, chief po-lice, St. Odile. I want to know if y'all gotta file on wan Jeff Berdell."

"Just a minute," the New Orleans man requested. After a short interval he came back with the information, "Jeff Berdell, small-time hood. Specialty, odd jobs in dark alleys at reasonable rates. Limit, assault and battery. Three convictions. What's he been doing down your way, Chief?"

"He done got hisself all shot up wit' a machine gun," Henry explained.

"Well," the other philosophized, "guys like that can expect to get it in the neck, sooner or later. Anything else you'd like to know, Chief?"

"You can give me some dope on wan Max Thielson, yes?"

"Same class as Berdell. Five-year stretch in Angola, back in Twenty-nine. Hi-jacking. Say, what's coming off down there?"

When Henry told him, the New Orleans cop declared: "We got a call from Sheriff Vicou to be on the lookout for a guy with a sore shoulder. Most likely, he's the one who rubbed out Berdell. Anything else, Chief?"

"That," Henry drawled, "will be all fo' now. I thank you." He shoved the telephone angrily to the center of the desk. "Gang beezness," he grunted. "*Ma foi,* I wish, me, those hot-shots would pick some other place." He rose and straightened his Sam Browne belt. "Me, I am going to pass maself down by the bya and look in on Theophile Abadie. Mebbe he will know some-t'ing, him."

THE fog was thinning out as Henry headed south along the bayou road. Oil-drilling operations had withdrawn from the immediate vicinity of St. Odile, and the forest of derricks which until recently had risen above the surrounding marshes were now replaced by "Christmas trees," tall, branched pipes marking the locations of hundreds of capped wells. But the piles of well-casing, the tiers of crated machinery and the stacks of lumber lining the levee indicated that St. Odile was still the jumping-off place for the oil fields.

Henry crossed over to the levee and walked slowly past a line of vessels moored off the batture—lumber schooners and oyster schooners, a couple of tugboats and innumerable smaller craft. A hundred yards downstream from Abadie's wharf lay a trim, seventy-five-foot ketch.

Passing the town limits, Henry headed toward a small clap-boarded building on the levee. On the side of the building facing toward town was painted the legend:

"Boats and Fishing Tackle for Rent.
Expert Marine Repairs. Guides Furnished.
Theophile Abadie, Prop."

From the levee a ramshackle wharf projected into the bayou, at its offshore end a couple of red fuel pumps. About the building were a number of boats in various stages of construction.

Henry pushed open the door of the little building and entered. An old man seated in a tilted swivel chair, with his feet on the scarred pine table, sat erect and favored him with a white-toothed grin.

"Ha, *mon ami!*" Theophile Abadie greeted in "gumbo ya-ya." "You are here again—and after information." He brought his feet to the floor, rose and filled two cups with black coffee from the dripper set on top of a wood heater in the middle of the room. He placed one of the cups before Henry and, having observed the require-

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ments of bayou country hospitality, sat down again and grumbled, "You never come to see me unless you want to find out something, you know."

Henry took a sip of coffee and grinned over the rim of his cup at the old boat builder, whose face was brown and wrinkled as a walnut shell, and embellished with a sweeping white mustache and tufted eyebrows that looked like dabs of cotton above his shrewd, dark eyes. His white hair, cropped close all over his round skull, stood up stiffly, like stubble in a freshly mowed hayfield.

"What does the law require of me this time, old-timer?" Abadie prompted.

"The law wishes to know which vessels you gassed up on Thursday, last," Henry declared.

HE WATCHED the old man's face. In his long life, Theophile Abadie had been by turns a deep-water sailor, a fisherman and a rum-runner. Now he was a boatbuilder and a purveyor of marine supplies, which included gasoline, kerosene and lubricating oil. Also, his little shack was a sounding board for every whisper of gossip that drifted up over the marshes from the Gulf, thirty miles to the south.

"I gassed many boats on Thursday," Abadie confessed. He opened a greasy sales ledger and thumbed through the pages. "Ha! Eleven boats no less."

Henry stared thoughtfully through the dusty window at the ketch moored a few hundred feet downstream. Something prompted him to ask:

"You gassed that one, yes?"

Abadie shook his head. "Not gas, *mon ami*. Kerosene—thirty gallons."

"So? What do you know about her?"

The old man lifted bony shoulders in a shrug. "What is there to know? I furnish kerosene for her motor. Her owner takes a trip in her down to the gulf about every six or eight weeks, for tarpon. That is all."

"They would have to come to you for kerosene, yes?"

"*Mais oui.* The cannery is the only other source of supply. But they have no general sales license."

"Tell me all you know about that one," Henry suggested.

Abadie's eyebrows wriggled up his forehead like white caterpillars.

"What is there to know?" he parried. "A boat is brought to my wharf for service. I furnish that service and collect my price. Should I concern myself further?"

"Someone must stay on board," Henry said.

"Certainly. If there were not someone standing guard all the time, those damned shantyboaters would strip her down to the keel."

"You can tell me what that one looks like, yes?"

Abadie shrugged. "If he were standing before me now," he declared, "I might be able to identify him as the keeper of that ketch boat. I have seen him only on two occasions, both times after dark. You see?"

"You have heard about the two murders, yes?"

Abadie regarded Henry with quizzical black eyes. "You think the keeper of that ketch boat is responsible?"

"I don't know," Henry confessed. "All I am sure of at this moment is that both John-ee Garcon and the man found in Wilkes' wagon were killed by the same gun. The bullets are proof of that. But so far, I have been unable to find a motive."

"If a certain lumber schooner were in port," the old boatbuilder said, "you might find a motive." Grinning reminiscently, he continued, "It seems that her skipper ordered five gallons of shrimp from John-ee. John-ee brought the shrimp as ordered. But the skipper refused to accept them. So John-ee got into his skiff and worked her in under the stern of the schooner and tied the gunnysack filled with shrimp to the vessel's rudder pendant. You know how dead shrimp can smell in hot weather. But the skipper couldn't discover the source of the so awful odor because of the long stern overhang. And no one, knowing how he had treated John-ee would tell him. When he did find out, he swore to shoot John-ee on sight."

Henry rose and put on his hat. "I think we can eliminate the schooner captain as a possible suspect. This affair is bigger than any gunnysack of decaying shrimp, although it is beginning to smell almost as bad. Well, if you learn anything, give me a ring. *Au'voir!*"

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HENRY left the boatyard and continued along the levee. Presently he halted abreast of the ketch and looked over the trim vessel. He noticed that the canvas covers of her sails were stiff as boards from repeated coats of paint, and that her halyards were seized on their pins, evidence that her sails were seldom if ever used. A heavy brass padlock securing the companion slide indicated that the vessel's keeper wasn't on board.

Henry shrugged and continued on toward the shantyboat colony a few hundred yards farther down stream. Reaching his objective, he walked down the sloping face of the levee to the batture, where a brown-faced woman, with a snuff swab projecting from the right side of her mouth, was scrubbing clothes under a palmetto-thatched shed.

"You know which is the shantyboat of John-ee Garcon, Madame?" he inquired, tipping his hat.

The woman straightened up and regarded him with apathetic gray eyes, then shifted her snuff stick to the opposite side of her mouth, raised her right hand, slowly, as if its weight were too much for her, and pointed to one of the boats in the line.

"That green-painted one is his'n. But he hain't home," she declared in a languid drawl that suggested Arkansas or West Tennessee.

Henry thanked her, stepped across the narrow gangplank to the deck of the green-painted shantyboat. Finding the door of the cabin padlocked, he took from his pocket a bunch of keys and soon had the door open.

To his surprise, the tiny cabin was as neat as a New England parlor. The deck was covered with linoleum which showed the effects of frequent scrubbings. A stove mounted on a brick platform glistened with polish. A red and white checkered oilcloth covered the small pine table, above which was a wall cupboard filled with gleaming crockery. The bunk held a mattress stuffed with Spanish moss and covered with two clean blankets. Tacked to the white-painted interior walls were a number of lithographs, evidently cut from calendars. Recalling the unkempt appearance of the late owner, Henry smiled.

"Ma foi!" he mused, "I wouldn't mind living here myself. This only proves that one seldom really knows another person. Of a certainty, one would never connect it with a scarecrow like poor old John-ee Garcon."

He began a search of the cabin. He rummaged through the bunk, prodding the mattress and pillow. He lifted the dishes from the cupboard and scrutinized the wall behind in search of a secret closet. He even looked inside the stove and probed the cold wood ashes. Finally, he turned his attention to the lithographs tacked on the walls, lifting them one by one away from the boards, until he discovered that one concealed a short length of loose sheathing. When he pried loose the board, he saw a quart fruit jar standing on a narrow shelf formed by nailing a short length of two-by-four between two of the framing timbers of the cabin house. Inside the jar was a roll of bills tied with fishing line.

"So?" he murmured. "This eliminates the possibility that John-ee Garcon was murdered for his money." Sitting on the edge of the bunk, he counted the bills, which amounted to twenty-one hundred dollars.

He retied the roll of money and returned it to the fruit jar, which he wrapped in a sheet of newspaper. In his search he had found nothing that would give him a clue to Johnny Garcon's past. Neither had he discovered anything that would give him a hint as to why the old man had been murdered. More puzzled than ever, he locked the door of the shantyboat cabin and headed back toward town.

A FEW blocks beyond Abadie's boat yard, Henry paused before a store front outlined in red neon tubing. A flaking gold leaf sign on the upper half of the plate glass window read: *"L' Oignon Rouge."* The lower half of the window was painted white over the legend in black letters, "Placide's Bar and Grill."

Henry stood on tiptoe and looked over the painted lower half of the window. Inside, a man in a white jacket was leaning over a newspaper spread on the bar. At the farther end of the bar a lone customer was resting one elbow on the mahogany and posing with a highball in his other hand while he studied his reflection in the back bar mirror.

Henry studied the man. As the chief guardian of the town's peace and tranquility,

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he made it his business to know what went on inside the corporate limits, and to keep track of the comings and goings of strangers. But he couldn't recall having seen this man before.

Henry pushed open the door and was greeted with a blare from a juke box giving out with the current lyrical imbecility. The man in the white jacket looked up, his gargoyle face creasing in a grin of welcome.

"Hya, Cap'n Henry?" he greeted in a deep voice which sounded as if he were speaking through a length of iron pipe. "Long time no see."

Henry grinned. "When you don't see me, Placide," he declared, "you can be sho' you are hokay wit' the law. Yes." He moved closer to the bar and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Jus' who is that man of distinction, him?"

Placide Boisson swivelled a glance toward the lone customer and snickered. "Him, he works on a swimp boat. Name o' Legasse, from Morgan City."

"So?" Henry drawled. "Hokay, Placide, I want you to come up to Wilkes' place to identify a daid feller."

The grin fled from Placide's face and he shivered. "Me," he rumbled, "I don't know any daid guys."

"You may know this wan," Henry insisted. "Get somebody to tak' yo' place and come along."

The ex-pug grunted resignedly, opened a door behind the bar and called to someone in the kitchen, "Hey, Val, mind the bar for a few minutes. I'm goin' out." He shucked off his white jacket, put on a hat and coat and came around in front. "Less go."

As they walked side by side along the bayou road, Henry recalled that once upon a time the big hulking fellow had been the town's most eminent juvenile delinquent. Fleeing home at the age of fifteen, to avoid a charge af assault and battery, Placide had joined a carnival company. During the years that followed, he had toured the United States and most of Canada as a boxer, taking on all comers, and acquiring in the interval a face like a chopping block and two cauliflower ears. Finally he had drifted back to St. Odile, flat broke, and had taken a job as night watchman of a fur storage warehouse in Sellierville. The building had been burned to the ground in an attempted insurance swindle, and one of the owners had been murdered. Placide had been framed for the job. Henry not only had cleared him of the charge, but had shared with him the reward paid by the insurance company. Now owner of the Red Onion Bar and Grill, Placide was more prosperous than he ever had been in his life. As a result, he was devoted to Henry.

They went through the alley and entered the undertaking establishment by the rear door. Placide took off his hat and moved as if he were walking on eggs. He shivered visibly when Henry drew back the sheet from Jeff Berdell's face.

"Uh—sure," he rumbled. "I seen dat guy before. Uster come in my joint. Never knowed his name, me."

"Ever see him wit' somebody else?" Henry quizzed.

"Uh, sure didn't. But I gotta idee he was keepin' tabs on another guy."

"So?" Henry murmured. "Tell me about that wan."

"Well," Placide began hesitantly, "dis other guy, he uster use de phone in my joint to call N'Awlyins. An' every time dis here daid guy would be close up, like he was tryin' to get hisself an earful."

"That other wan, he didn't catch on, no?"

Placide lifted beefy shoulders in a shrug. "I wouldn't know. Dey was bot' in my place las' night, right up to closin' time."

"W'at that other wan look lak'?" Henry probed.

Placide shut both eyes and screwed up his gargoyle face in a painful effort to concentrate. "Uh—jus' a little bitty guy, him," he declared presently. "Wouldn't weigh in at no more'n one twenty-five. Kinda peewee you wouldn't give more'n a passin' look. He was off'n some boat, I t'ink."

Henry drew the sheet over the dead man's face. "Hokay, Placide. You done tol' me a lot. I don't know yet w'at it amounts to. But I reckon it will wo'k itself out bimeby. Well, I gotta stick around fo' the inquest, but you may go, Placide. *Merci!*"

"Glad to help any time, Cap'n Henry," the ex-pug grunted. He put on his hat and shuffled hurriedly from the room.

Henry loafed in Wilkes' office until the jury heard the evidence, viewed the bodies

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and brought in the verdict that Jean Duson, alias Johnny Garcon, and Jeff Berdell had died from gunshot wounds inflicted by some person or persons at present unknown. The jury added a rider that the law enforcement authorities leave no stone unturned to bring to justice the person or persons who had committed the crime.

After Dr. Couriere had taken charge of Johnny Garcon's little hoard and had signed the burial permits, Henry returned to headquarters, just as a blast from the cannery whistle announced the noon hour. He had had a busy morning, and the afternoon and evening promised to be even busier, since Saturday was St. Odile's most important day of the week. Already, people were coming in from outlying farms for their next week's supplies. Men were drifting up from trapper and fishing camps and from oil-drilling locations in the marshes for an evening of more or less civilized drinking, all of which was far from conducive to the peace and dignity of the community.

To his relief, nothing happened. The evening passed as quietly as a Sunday school picnic. When midnight came, he went home for a full night's sleep, without even a single case of drunk and disorderly on the blotter.

ON SUNDAY morning, on his way to headquarters, Henry came around by Fourth Street to the bayou road, freshly bathed and barbered and smelling strongly of shaving lotion, his uniform neatly pressed, the finish of his Sam Browne belt rivalling the mirror-like polish of his small shoes, his handlebar mustache glossy with brilliantine.

He halted on the corner of the bayou road and looked over the waterfront, feeling at peace with the world, and filled with the sense of well-being that comes with a breakfast of sausage, eggs and pancakes washed down with numerous cups of fragrant Cajan coffee. The morning was brilliant with sunshine, and the high-vaulted, intensely blue sky gave promise of clear weather, while a gentle breeze blew from the southwest, laden with the salt tang of the Gulf and the earthy odor of the marshes.

"What a day for fishing!" he murmured regretfully. "Eh, man, they bite like fury with a southwest wind. *Ma foi,* yes!"

He was about to resume his stroll toward headquarters when he saw a black sedan pull away from the berthing space of the ketch. The car came up the bayou road at a bare crawl, turned right opposite the municipal wharf and passed through the entrance of Beranger's garage. Catching a glimpse of the driver, Henry was vaguely reminded of Placide Boisson, for the man behind the wheel of the sedan had shoulders like those of a work-horse and the dished nose and beetling brows of a broken-down prize-fighter.

Crossing over to the levee, Henry looked downstream toward the ketch. He saw a man on the batture passing a hamper over the side to another man in the cockpit of the little vessel. Until that moment, Henry had put all thought of the killings from his mind, resolved to get through Sunday without beating his brains or wearing out shoe leather in search of clues which very possibly didn't exist. Besides, he was satisfied that sooner or later the killer would make the inevitable step which would land him in the police net. Still, he told himself, it could do no harm at this time to investigate the vessel, now that her people had at last come on board.

He strolled jauntily along the levee, halted in the cover of a stack of lumber and looked over the vessel, noticing for the first time the name inscribed in four-inch black and very apparent letters on her bows: *Whirlaway.*

In the cockpit, a fat man with a three-decker chin and a petulant, down-drawn mouth was fussing with a heavy, deep-sea fishing rod. Seated on the storm sill of the companion was a short slender man of indeterminate age, who carried his left arm in a sling.

Henry's interest quickened as he studied the face of the little man and noted the tight-lipped mouth, the flaring nostrils and the peculiar flatness of the man's small, brown eyes. Even if the sketchy description furnished by Dr. Mabot were insufficient to identify him as the man who had forced the doctor to dress his wounded shoulder, the fact that he carried his left arm in a sling rated, at least, a routine questioning.

Crossing the gangplank to the vessel's deck, Henry stepped down into the cockpit.

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The fat man laid aside his fishing rod and favored Henry with a hostile stare.

"Well, Officer," he demanded curtly, "what can we do for you?"

"I want to ask this feller a few question'" Henry declared. "W'at's the matter with yo' arm?" he inquired, giving the little man the "eagle eye."

"Mr. Mallick sprained his shoulder last Wednesday," the fat man explained. "He fell off the running board of a car." He glared at Henry and continued, "I am Mr. Chavard, of New Orleans, the owner of this vessel. I fail to see how Eddie's injury can concern you."

Henry stroked his handlebar mustache and eyed the little man, who seemed perfectly willing to let Chavard to do the talking. "Would Meestaire Mallick be willing to let a local doctor examine that shoulder?" he asked.

Mallick's thin-lipped mouth twisted in a sneer. "You're outa your depth, copper," he drawled. "We're outside the town limits here, where you ain't got no authority. See?"

"You mak' the beeg mistake, ma frien'," Henry drawled. "Besides being chief po-lice of St. Odile, I am special deputy fo' Papillon Parish. Also, as an honorary member of the State Po-lice, I have authority to mak' an arrest anywhere in the state. Now how 'bout letting a doctor look at that shoulder?"

"This is my boat," Chavard put in. "And while I am on board, it is my home. You have no right here without a warrant. A man's home is his castle, you know. However, I'm curious to know why you want to have Eddie's shoulder examined."

"Early yesterday mo'ning," Henry began, "two men were shot to death. One of the men shot back and wounded his killer. Later that mo'ning, a man with a bullet wound in his lef' shoulder entered the home of Doctor Mabot, in Sellierville, and fo'ced him at the point of a gun to dress his wound. He also wrecked the doctor's telephone and took a clean shirt and a street coat. The description furnish' by the doctor, fits this peewee feller lak' the pants on a statue. Yes."

"That's impossible," Chavard argued. "Eddie was with me in the city all week, and didn't leave there until we started down here at midnight."

He looked up as a hulking man crossed the gangplank. Henry recognized the newcomer as the man he had seen driving the black sedan a short while before. The man stepped down into the cockpit and looked dumbly from Henry to the fat man.

"What's cookin'?" he inquired.

"I was just telling the chief here about you pushing Eddie off the running board of your car the other day," Chavard explained glibly. "You remember, don't you?"

The big man's brows wrinkled, as if he weren't quite sure why he'd been asked the question. He mumbled, "Uh-sure. Pushed him off'n the runnin' board."

"Wednesday evening," Chavard prompted.

"That's right, Boss. We'nsday evenin', it was. Yeah."

"I should think the testimony of my chauffeur, Mr. Kozad, and myself would convince you that you're barking up the wrong tree," Chavard suggested.

Henry smiled thinly at the fat man's futile effort to cover up for Mallick. He said, "I still want a doctor to look at that shoulder."

Chavard stared helplessly at Henry, his three chins quivering like a bowl of jelly in an earthquake. "Let's go inside and talk it over," he suggested. "If Eddie's willing, you may see his shoulder."

Mallick glared venemously at Henry, rose and preceded them into the cabin. Chavard sank on a seat locker, pulled a silk handkerchief from the pocket of his fishing jumper and dabbed at his fat, perspiring face.

"I am a member of a fishing club, Officer," he began. "We're due to meet at noon off Grand Isle, for a tarpon rodeo. There's considerable money wagered on the result. Now, If I don't show up, I'll lose not only my entrance money, and my personal wager, but will forfeit any chance I might have of winning first place."

"I ain't stopping you from going," Henry pointed out. "It's this Mallick I'm interested in."

"But I need him to run the boat," Chavard argued. "Look, I'm a reasonable man, and I assume that you are, too. What would you say if I hand you my personal check for, say, a thousand dollars, as a sort of unofficial bond—"

Smelling a bribe, Henry lifted his hand. "Hol' yo' horse!" he snapped. "I ain't fall-

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ing fo' that line." He looked at Mallick, whose right hand was inching toward his left armpit. "And don't try to pull that gun, you peewee."

"No, Eddie!" Chavard warned. He looked up at Henry and continued, "Well, I'd hoped we could have reached an agreement. So, I guess, there is only one thing to do." He stared over Henry's shoulder. "Okay, Al."

Because he was watching Eddie Mallick's right hand, Henry wasn't aware that Kozad had moved in behind him until something impacted with the shock of a sledgehammer stroke against the angle of his jaw, below the left ear. Spun around by the force of the blow, he wavered drunkenly, while through glazing eyes he watched the battered face of the big man contort in a ferocious scowl and saw the fellow's monstrous left fist dart like a striking rattlesnake toward his chin. Then a blinding white light flashed inside his skull, and he pitched head foremost to the deck, out cold.

WHEN Henry regained consciousness, he felt the lazy rise and fall of the vessel's hull and realized that the *Whirlaway* must have cleared Bayou Papillon and be now in the open Gulf.

Opening his eyes, he looked about a tiny, triangular compartment, which seemed to be compressed into the bows of the ketch. A dusty portlight on either side of the forepeak admitted a half-hearted illumination which revealed two pipe bunks, a locker, the door of which swung open and creaked dismally to the rise and fall of the vessel's hull, and another door leading, apparently, to the cabin.

Henry lay flat on his back in one of the bunks, his hands crossed on his stomach, his wrists manacled with his own handcuffs.

"Nom d'un tortue!" he murmured prayerfully as his plight became apparent to him. "This is one time I seem to have stuck my neck out too far."

Raising his hands, he glared at the bright steel links encircling his wrists and swore under his breath. If the courthouse gang in Sellierville should ever hear about this, he would become the laughing stock of the parish.

Turning on his side, he peered through the dusty glass of the port at the head of his bunk and saw the blue Gulf horizon rise and fall as the ketch hurdled the long, lazy swells, pushing before her a huge bow wave which suggested that she was being driven to the limit of her auxiliary power.

"One realizes now why her sails are never used," Henry mused. "That fat one, he wishes to get somewhere in a great hurry. But why? *Ma foi!* I wish I knew the answer to that."

He lay on his back again and stared at the closed door, from the other side of which there came an indistinct murmur of voices, blending with the subdued flutter of the Diesel exhaust. A clatter of table ware indicated that his captors were dining.

Henry's Sam Browne belt was gone, and with it, the bunch of keys which he carried at the end of a thin brass chain. Hopefully, he lifted his manacled hands and dipped a finger and thumb into the slit pocket in the waistband of his trousers. He chuckled when his finger came in contact with a small, flat key.

Turning on his side, with his back to the door, so that his body would shield his hands from view of anyone peering through the circular brass ventilator in the upper half of the panel, he tried to work the tiny key into the key slot in the cuff encircling his left wrist.

THERE was little air in the tiny forecastle, and the sun beating down on the deck overhead turned the compartment into a veritable furnace. Perspiration streamed down Henry's face, trickled into his eyes and left his fingers so slippery that several times the key escaped from his grasp, and he was forced to hunt for it among the wrinkled, musty-smelling blankets that covered the bunk. Only because of the necessary clearance allowed by the four steel links connecting the cuffs was he finally able to insert the key in the slot and give it a half turn.

"Nom d' un tortue!" he muttered as his left hand came free. "That was the hardest job I ever undertook."

The atmosphere of the forecastle was like the interior of a Turkish bath. Henry's sodden clothing clung like a second skin to his short, muscular frame. Perspiration beaded his eyebrows and dripped off the ends of his

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handlebar mustache. But the discomfort meant little to him, now that his hands were free.

Setting both cuffs, so that he could slip them over his hands, he put them on again, lay back on the bunk with his hands crossed on his stomach and studied their fit. He was satisfied that no one would notice at first glance that he had managed to get them loose.

No longer weighed down by the feeling of utter helplessness, he slid off the bunk, tiptoed to the door and peered through the ventilator in the upper part of the panel. He could see through the cabin to the cockpit, where Chavard sat beside the wheel. At a small table in the cabin, Al Kozad and Eddie Mallick were munching sandwiches and swigging coffee from white enamelware mugs. Looking out astern of the ketch, Henry saw off the port quarter what appeared to be a vast platform, topped by a number of oil derricks rising above the surface of the sea. Low along the northern horizon was a gray-green smudge which he knew to be land.

"That's the oil-drilling location eight miles south of Grand Isle," Henry reflected. "That fat one said he was due to meet some club fishing boats hereabouts. But he seems to be heading southeast, away from this vicinity."

A faint humming sound came to his ears. Glancing skyward, Henry saw a cruising seaplane gleaming like a silver bird against the blue of the sky. Somehow, the sight of the Coast Guard plane reassured him. In this section of the Gulf, one was seldom out of sight of a patrolling plane or cutter. This, he realized, would make his captors cautious. If they were planning to kill him and dump his body overboard, they would wait for the cover of darkness, rather than take the risk of their actions being spotted from some patrolling aircraft.

Satisfied that he was safe until nightfall, he returned to the bunk and lay down, feeling that he had all the advantage, now that his hands were free. To get to him, his captors must enter the forecastle. Knowing him to be unarmed, and believing him to be handcuffed, they would be inclined to be careless. Henry smiled at the thought.

"I wonder," he mused, "if any of them knows what it feels like to be hit with a pair of handcuffs."

FOUR hours dragged by, seeming like so many weeks. The sun passed the zenith and rolled westward, its slanting rays beating pitilessly upon the deck above Henry's head. The ketch continued her headlong rush toward the southeast, shouldering aside the seas which fanned out to port and starboard in a vast spearhead of foam.

Two more hours passed. Then the ketch slowed, her motor was stilled and she lay rocking gently to the lazy, Gulf swell. Stepping to the door, Henry peered through the ventilator. In the cockpit Chavard was plying his deep-sea rod, trolling a lure astern of the vessel, which was moving in a wide circle, with her motor barely turning over. Kozad sat beside the wheel, with his right hand gripping a spoke, Eddie Mallick was stretched on a seat locker in the cabin, apparently asleep.

For the next hour, Henry watched Chavard bring in half a dozen redfish. All about the ketch the sea held the peculiar bronze-green tint caused by the silt-laden outfall of the Mississippi. Once, when the vessel was pointed southward, Henry saw, far astern, a gray-green smudge of land, topped by a radio tower.

"That must be the Passes," he reflected. "This doesn't make sense."

To him, it seemed unbelievable that the fat man should have laid himself open to a charge of assaulting and kidnaping a peace officer merely to go fishing.

Another hour passed. The sun was now far down toward the western horizon, but Chavard fished on. In the cabin, Eddie Mallick sat up on the locker, yawned and rubbed his eyes with his free hand. Then he turned his head and stared reflectively at the forecastle door. Fearing that the little man had discovered him peering through the ventilator, Henry retreated to the bunk and lay down again.

Footfalls sounded outside the door. The key clicked in the lock and the panel swung outward. Mallick peered into the gloomy compartment and leered at Henry.

"Still nice an' cozy, I see," he jeered. Stepping into the room, he added, "I gotta question to ask you, copper."

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It would have been easy for Henry to slip the handcuffs, knock Mallick cold and take his gun. Once armed, he could subdue Chavard and Kozad. But he realized that such a triumph would gain him nothing.

FOR one thing, he had no direct evidence that Mallick had murdered either Jeff Berdell or Johnny Garcon. Even Dr. Mabot's identification would be discounted, since it was obvious that Chavard and Kozad would maintain that the little man had been in New Orleans on the night of the killings, thus creating a preponderance of evidence in his favor. Being that sort of people, they could bring a dozen witnesses from the city who would unblushingly corroborate their testimony. And Mallick would go free, because rural juries in Louisiana are notoriously reluctant to convict on circumstantial evidence.

As for the assault and kidnaping charge, Chavard might attempt to pass that off as a practical joke and offer to pay damages. Or he might maintain that he had acted within his rights, as Henry had boarded the ketch without a warrant. If he succeeded in convincing a jury on either point, he would get off with no greater punishment than payment of a fine. If that happened, Henry would never learn what motive had prompted the murders of Jeff Berdell and Johnny Garcon.

For that reason, he decided to postpone his break. Through slitted eyelids, he watched Mallick advance toward the bunk, the gun under his left armpit making a noticeable bulge that was only partly concealed by the sling supporting his left arm.

Sitting on the edge of the bunk, Mallick stared down into Henry's face and inquired in a conversational tone, "Tell me, copper, how you got onto me?"

"Because you left a trail like a tractor," Henry replied, grinning. "You ain't very smot, peewee."

"You—!" The little man's eyes flashed, and he struck Henry across the mouth. "You call me that again an' I'll gouge your damned eyes out an' throw 'em to the fish. See?"

Henry masked his anger under a smile of apology. "Ma mistak'," he murmured.

"Mistake? You're damned tootin', it was a mistake," Mallick snarled. "Lotsa guys made the same mistake. But they ain't around any more. See?" He poked a forefinger at Henry's chest. "You ain't answered my question."

"Lak' I say," Henry drawled, "you lef' a trail lak' a tractor. All I had to do, me, was to wait ontil you showed up again."

"Where'd you find that Berdell guy?"

Henry told him of the discovery of Berdell's body in the undertaker's dead wagon. Mallick snickered.

"He was runnin', an' me chasin' him," he confessed. "Y'see, I wanted to get in another burst. But all of a sudden he disappeared."

"Why did you shoot ol' John-ee Garcon?" Henry probed.

"That old bum? I didn't have nothin' again him," Mallick declared. "He just stepped outa the dark, just as I pulled down on Berdell."

"That Berdell, he was working fo' Thielson, no?" Henry prompted.

The little man's eyes opened wide. "How in hell d'ja know that?" he demanded angrily.

"We know a lot mo' about you fellers than y'all think," Henry assured him. "We know that wan was spying on you, and that you got wise and shot him up. He shot back at you and nicked yo' shoulder."

Mallick nodded slowly. "You got it all down pat," he admitted. "Sure, that's just the way it was. But Berdel was only the first of Thielson's mob to go. We got Thielson and the others last night."

"So?" Henry encouraged in a polite murmur.

"Blasted 'em to hellangone," the little man boasted. "They were all aboard o' Thielson's boat, the *Daphne*, at a dock out on the lake front. The boss and Kozad an' me drove out that way in the car. Thielson an' his boys were playin' gin rummy in the cabin, when I tossed a pineapple aboard." He grinned and licked his lips. "They didn't have time to be surprised, even."

"Obviously, no," Henry agreed politely. "But w'at was the objec' of wiping out them fellers?"

"They were aimin' to hi-jack us," Mallick explained. "Thielson uster belong to

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our mob. But he pulled out an' started up on his own, takin' Berdell with him—." He broke off as Kozad appeared suddenly in the doorway.

"Shootin' off yer mouth, hey?" the big fellow rumbled. "Some day you're gonna hang yourself with yer own tongue. Boss wants you. The boat's in sight."

"Okay, Heavy," Mallick retorted. He slapped Henry's face and then added insult to injury by grasping one side of his handlebar mustache and almost yanking it out by the roots. "So long, copper! Mebbe the boss'll let me pull that soup strainer off before he sends you for a swim." He slapped Henry's face again and followed Kozad from the room.

Quivering with rage, Henry watched the door swing shut after them and heard the key grate in the lock. Only by a supreme effort at self-control had he refrained from slipping the handcuffs and knocking the little mobster cold.

He felt the accelerated thrust of the propeller as the ketch picked up speed, swung around and headed due south. Peering through the portlight, he saw a rusty tramp steamer heading northward toward the Mississippi passes, where the great river flows into the Gulf.

SENSING that he was on the verge of a discovery, he rose and tiptoed to the door. Peering through the ventilator slot, he saw that Mallick was now handling the wheel and steering a course that would put the ketch to leeward of the oncoming steamer. Chavard, fishing rod in hand, was industriously trolling a lure astern. Kozad was standing by with a dip net lashed to the end of an eight-foot pole.

Slowly, the steamer drew up toward the ketch, her rust-streaked hull riding so high that her threshing propeller was only half submerged, the French tricolor drooping from her jackstaff. As she passed through Henry's limited field of vision, a man wearing a cook's white cap and apron emerged from the galley abaft the bridge and dumped a pail of garbage over the rail. Then the steamer drew away, leaving the ketch pitching in her spreading wash.

Half an hour passed, with the ketch cruising in a narrow circle. Northward, the steamer was slowly merging into the gathering twilight. Westward, the sun hung like a flaming copper disc above the horizon, its almost level rays laying down a blood-red track on the sea. Chavard continued to ply his rod. Kozad stood by with his dip net. Mallick held the wheel and peered occasionally through a pair of binoculars. Suddenly Chavard reeled in his line, spoke sharply to the little man, who brought the ketch's head around and sent the vessel zigzagging to and fro over the path of the steamer, which was now almost invisible against the smokey loom of the land to northward. Suddenly Kozad plunged the dip net over the side, swung it inboard again and dumped in the bottom of the cockpit what looked like three flat-sided cans firmly lashed together.

Henry had long since concluded that Chavard and his confederates were engaged in the ghastly business of narcotics which, of all the criminal rackets, he considered the most despicable. But the small size of the cans convinced him that they didn't contain dope. Intently, he watched Chavard cut the lashings holding the containers together. Two of the cans seemed to be empty, for the fat man tossed them aside. Prying loose the cover of the third can, Chavard shook out four small chamois leather bags, each of which had a tag fastened to the string securing its mouth. He set the bags in a row on the cockpit seat, took a notebook from his pocket and checked the tags against an entry in the book. Finally he untied one of the bags. Then, holding it in his right hand, he poured into his left palm a scintillating trickle that reflected the coppery glow of the setting sun until it seemed as if he were pouring from the bag a stream of liquid fire.

"What is all this?" Henry muttered. Then, as realization came to him like a slap in the face, he grunted, "Diamonds!"

IN HIS years as a peace officer, Henry had come up against many types of lawbreaker. But this was his first encounter with the elite of the criminal world known euphemistically as the "ice importer."

In silent wonder, he watched Chavard examine the contents of the other bags and check their tags against the entry in his notebook. This, he reasoned, was big busi-

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ness. To engage in diamond smuggling required money. Threatened with exposure or loss, its operators would not balk at murder. The deaths of Jeff Berdell and Johnny Garcon and, if Mallick were to be believed, the wiping out of Thielson's mob, were sufficient proof of that.

It was already dark in the little forecastle, and the early December dusk was settling like a gray-blue mist over the Gulf. Westward, the last rays of the setting sun were peering through a curtain of orange and purple clouds. In the cockpit, Eddie Mallick and Al Kozad silently watched Chavard as he retied the chamois leather bags. Presently the fat man rose, stepped into the cabin and stowed the bags in an overhead locker.

"Come here, Al," he called.

Kozad entered the cabin and halted beside Chavard. The fat man put his mouth close to the big fellow's ear and whispered something. Kozad drew back, his scarred face puckered in a scowl of amazement.

"You don't mean that, Boss?" Henry heard him mumble.

"I certainly do," Chavard declared in a barely audible voice. "He damned nearly ruined the organization. I can't afford to take any more risks. Send him in."

He drew a .45 caliber automatic from under his left armpit and sat down on a seat locker. Laying the gun on his left thigh, he crossed his right leg over it, so that the weapon was concealed. As Mallick entered, the fat man waved him toward a seat across the cabin.

"Eddie," Chavard drawled, "you know that we have no place for bunglers in this organization."

Mallick shrugged carelessly. "Sure, Boss."

"That stunt you pulled back there in St. Odile the other night might have ruined us," the fat man accused.

"What the hell?" Mallick snarled. "I knew Berdell was keepin' tabs on the boat—"

"You could have warned me about that, instead of taking the law into your own hands," Chavard interrupted. "Al and I would then have taken care of him, just as we took care of his boss, Thielson, and the rest of that crummy mob. But it wasn't enough for you to knock off Berdell, but you also had to kill that old town bum."

"Hell!" Mallick protested. "The old guy stepped right into it."

THE fat man shrugged. "If you'd laid off Berdell, that wouldn't have happened. But, to make matters worse, you busted in on that doctor in Sellierville and made him dress your shoulder. That was your greatest boner. Within an hour after you pulled it, every cop from St. Odile to New Orleans was on the lookout for you. And they've probably identified you by now."

"Aw, hell, Boss!" the little man protested. "They can't prove a thing. Nobody knows I worked with you."

The fat man shrugged. "Cops aren't so dumb, Eddie," he declared. "Look how close that hick cop came to putting the arm on you this morning. Fortunately, he came alone. If he'd had another with him, we'd have been sunk. I had wit enough to make sure of that before I gave Al the nod to lay him out."

"But we're in the clear now," Mallick argued. "We got rid of Thielson an' his mob. That leaves only the cop. He came alone. Nobody knows he came aboard. We bump him, an' there ain't nobody left to put the finger on us. See?"

Chavard shook his head. "You don't get it, Eddie. The cops are still looking for you. If they pick you up, that doctor will identify you, which will tie you in with the killing of Berdell and that local character. Once the cops get to nosing around for a motive, the whole organization will be in a dangerous position."

Mallick peered across the unlighted cabin at the fat man. "Say," he queried suspiciously, "what in hell's the idea of all the preachin'?"

"Waddell and I have a lot of money tied up in this enterprise," Chavard continued smoothly. "If anything went wrong, we'd not only lose close to half a million, but we'd all be on the inside, looking out. Not only that, but my partner, Waddell, would be left high and dry in Amsterdam. He couldn't come back to America. So, you see, I can't afford to take any more chances with you, Eddie."

"I get it," Mallick said, his voice ominously soft. "You figure on knockin' me off. Well, Fatso, two can play at that game."

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His right hand darted under the sling supporting his left arm.

"You're too late, Eddie," Chavard declared coolly. Drawing the automatic from between his crossed legs, he fired hastily at Mallick and sent a bullet crashing through the little man's brain.

Mallick's head slammed back against the side of the cabin trunk. Then he lunged forward off the seat and measured his length on the deck, his right hand still gripping the butt of the automatic underneath his left armpit, blood oozing from the bullet hole between his eyes and forming a zig-zag line on the gray linoleum.

"Impetuous, Eddie," Chavard continued to address his victim. "That's always been your trouble. If you hadn't been so damned trigger-happy, the cops wouldn't have been looking for you now. As it is, you damned near put the organization on the spot. Sorry, Eddie, but you'd have been a menace to us as long as you lived." He slid his gun back in the holster under his left armpit. "Al."

"Yes, Boss?" Kozad spoke from the cockpit.

"We might as well get rid of our excess baggage and head for home." Chavard suggested, "With Eddie and the copper out of the way, we'll have nothing more to fear."

"Ain't it still a bit too light, Boss?" the big man argued.

Chavard stepped into the cockpit and looked over the darkening sea.

"It's dark enough now," he said. "There aren't any planes messing about over head. Tide's on the ebb, too. Eddie and that town bull will be half way to Yucatan before it turns." He sat down and took the wheel from Kozad. "Send the copper over first."

HENRY retreated hastily to the bunk and lay down, with every nerve tense, while he listened to Kozad's slow, deliberate footfalls echo through the cabin. Presently, the key rattled in the lock. The door creaked outward and the big fellow stepped through the opening. Crossing to the bunk, he peered down at the handcuffs loosely encircling Henry's wrists.

"Okay, copper," he grunted, "this is the end o' the line for you." He pulled Henry off the bunk, steadied him with a massive hand and then urged him toward the door. "On yer way! Knockin' you off is a must, copper. But, believe me, it's gonna hurt me worse'n you."

Slipping the bracelets over his hands, Henry gripped both cuffs in his left, whirled on his right heel and let fly a haymaker that landed flush on the angle of Kozad's jaw. The big man grunted, then dropped as if he had been struck by a lightning bolt.

"So?" Henry murmured, as he dropped to his knees and began searching Kozad for a gun. "She was hurt you worse than me. Eh, man! That was wan tam' you said a great, beeg mouthful. Yes."

His elation drained from him like air from a punctured balloon when he discovered that Kozad was unarmed. Obviously, the big fellow was one of those rare criminals who preferred nature's weapons. Peering through the darkened cabin to the cockpit, where the squat figure of Chavard loomed beside the wheel, he shivered in realization of the fat man's uncanny proficiency with a gun.

Henry withdrew his gaze from Chavard and peered at the indistinct figure of Mallick asprawl on the linoleum-covered deck in the cabin. As he recalled the little man's belated attempt to draw the gun carried in the shoulder holster under his left armpit, his hope revived. He saw that the dead man's right hand was still beneath the sling supporting his left arm, evidence that he hadn't succeeded in drawing the weapon before Chavard's bullet had managed to cut him down.

A match flared in the cockpit as Chavard lighted a cigar. "Having trouble with that cop, Al?" he inquired carelessly.

Henry tried to make his voice sound like Kozad's as he replied:

"No trouble, Boss."

SATISFIED that Kozad was completely out, Henry took a long breath and started aft, purposely dragging his feet to stimulate the uncertain movements of two men through the darkened cabin. There was a queer fluttering in the pit of his stomach when he reached the body of Mallick. Stooping, he pulled the dead man's right arm aside and plunged his right hand inside the fellow's open shirt front, a surge of elation sweeping over him as his fingers

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came in contact with the knurled butt of an automatic.

Henry thumbed back the safety catch of the gun and looked toward Chavard in the cockpit. The fat man was staring landward, the glowing tip of his cigar touching his round, triple-chinned face with reddish highlights. Far off the starboard bow a light twinkled low on the horizon.

Chavard withdrew his gaze and stared unbelievingly as Henry stepped through the companionway. His cigar wobbled between his lips. A flake of ash dropped from its tip and drifted downward over the bulging front of his shirt as, in slow comprehension, he lifted his eyes from the leveled gun to Henry's expressionless face.

Henry drawled, "Su'prise, yes?"

Chavard looked again at the leveled gun, took his cigar from between his teeth. "Al?" His voice was a mere whisper. "What happened to Al?"

"Al, he's having him a leetle nap," Henry drawled. He thrust a hand inside Chavard's shirt bosom and jerked the automatic from his shoulder holster. "This gun, she's spoil the hang of yo' spo't shirt. Yes. Now stan' up, you."

Dazedly, Chavard stood while Henry gave him a quick once over in search of more weapons. Satisfied that the fat man was now unarmed, he snapped one of the handcuffs on his right wrist.

"Look," Chavard began in desperate appeal, "I can make your fortune if you'll play ball with me."

"You," Henry drawled, "are talking plumb through yo' hat. One does not compromise wit' murder."

"I had to kill Eddie in self defense," Chavard pleaded. "If I hadn't fired first, he'd have got me. As you probably know, he killed those two men back there in St. Odile—"

"Lak' he rubbed out Thielson and his mob —at yo' orders," Henry interrupted. "Me, I'm going to tu'n y'all over to the Coas' Guard. But the Federal government mos' lakely will tu'n y'all over to the state to answer fo' that bombing job and the shooting of this peewee feller. Eh, man, you sho' got yo' tail in a crack. Yes."

"I can beat any charge you bring against me," Chavard bluffed. "But I'd rather compromise with you. Play along with me, and you'll profit; fight me, and you'll find yourself out on a limb. You'd better realize you're fighting big money. Be sensible, man!"

"In tam'," Henry retorted, 'you will fin' out that the law, she is bigger than all yo' money. Come along!" He yanked on the handcuffs and pulled the protesting Chavard after him through the cabin to the forecastle and manacled him to the still unconscious Kozad.

He locked the forecastle door and went aft again. Taking a bearing on Grand Isle light, he cut the motor to a bare crawl and put a becket on the wheel. He stepped back into the cabin and switched on the light. Then he opened the overhead locker and found his own gun and his Sam Browne belt.

HE BUCKLED on his belt and adjusted his long-barreled six-shooter in the holster. Taking the four little chamois leather bags from the locker, he laid them on the table. He didn't bother to examine their contents; to his logical mind, diamonds were merely glittering little stones, without any practical value except, perhaps, for scratching one's initials on plate glass windows. Yet, he reflected, six men had died violent deaths because of the contents of those little chamois leather bags: Jeff Berdell and Johnny Garcon, shot down by Eddie Mallick; Thielson and his two confederates killed in the bombing of their boat; Mallick, himself, shot to death by Chavard, because his continued existence threatened to become a danger to the smuggling ring. It was, Henry realized, the old, familiar chain reaction of crime.

"Six men dead and two due to burn," he reflected, "And all to save paying duty on a handful of shiny stones!" He sighed. "*Ma foi!* some people never learn."

He peered inside the overhead locker and saw an object that suggested something out of a Buck Rogers comic strip. Lifting it out into the light, he studied it in growing realization.

"A burp gun—obviously the one with which Berdell and John-ee Garcon were killed." he reflected.

Until the moment, he had been puzzled

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to account for the shallow penetration of the bullets which had killed the two men. It wasn't enough for him to know that they had been murdered by Eddie Mallick. He needed all the facts for the record, which would be incomplete unless he could explain why the slugs had penetrated only an inch or two beneath the skin of Jeff Berdell's back, or why the bullet which had killed Johnny Garcon had lodged in the bony structure of the skull, instead of burying itself in his brain. Now the .45 caliber cartridges remaining in the burp gun gave him the answer, for their copper shells were covered with a film of verdigris.

In the humidity of the Gulf states, ammunition deteriorates rapidly. The coating of verdigris on the cartridges in the clip of the burp gun indicated that the loads were old. Since the propelling charges in the cartridges had lost much of their force, penetration by the bullets had been slight.

Well pleased with this latest discovery, Henry returned the diamonds and the burp gun to the locker. His tidy mind had rebelled at the thought of leaving a single loose thread to be tugged at by defense lawyers. But the discovery of the burp gun and its almost dead ammunition enabled him to tuck in the last dangling thread.

His next problem was what to do with the prisoners. Since Mallick had been killed a good ten miles offshore, Henry realized that the Coast Guard should have first call, although the state of Louisiana claimed jurisdiction over these waters. In the end, the state would get them for the murder of Thielson and his associates. But for the present, the double charge of murder on the high seas and diamond smuggling would be sufficient cause for the Coast Guard's taking them and the ketch off his hands.

Stepping into the cockpit, he looked over the now darkened sea. Far to the southwest, the lights of the drilling platform were reflected in the sky above the horizon. Another light twinkled low on the northern skyline. That, he told himself, would be Grand Isle. Removing the becket from the wheel, he opened the throttle, swung the ketch around until her bow was bearing on Grand Isle light and headed her north, to deliver the vessel and his prisoners to Uncle Sam.

Railroad dicks—and Mohawk Daniels was a good one—use all sorts of gimmicks in the pursuit of their calling!

"Thunder from the Grave"
WILLIAM L. ROHDE

In the next number

"Cops by the plane-load" were forecast, but only two members of the Mounted turned up to solve the murder.

"ONE TOO MANY"
H. S. M. Kemp

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Some of the Old-Time Westerners Can Trail a Tick Over Hard Rock — but Now and Again the Younger Generation Doesn't Do So Badly Either

JOE TULL'S JOB

By BEN T. YOUNG

DAVE BALDWIN had soldiered under his own name. But later, knocking about doing odd things in odd places, he'd sometimes found it expedient to use others. Just now, as he dropped off the slow-rolling freight at Redrock, New Mexico, he was Joe Tull.

Shambling across the highway into the old adobe building which housed the general store and post-office, he addressed the proprietor. "D'yall know of a job round-

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abouts?" he drawled, looking dumber than a sheep.

The old coot (alone save for a loafing Apache buck) eyed Joe's stubbled cheeks, dusty ranch-hand garb, the cheap rolled blanket tied with a cord. "Nope," he sighed. "Things are quiet."

"Ain't there no cow outfits er—" Joe paused to light a cigarette he'd just rolled—"dude places?" he continued, squinting through the smoke.

"Well—" Evidently glad of a chance to unburden himself, the merchant eased back against a shelf stacked with denim clothing. "The cow outfits is mostly gone. When the Gov'ment set up that rocket-testin' layout yonder, they condemned a lot of grassland and moved the ranchers off, includin' the big Mescalero Cattle Company owned by eastern folks. What's left o' that—the ranch buildin's and a few hundred acres the Army didn't want—the Cattle Company leased to a jasper named Rishel from Denver. He's runnin' dudes, and from what I hear he's got a tony set-up, even a private airplane and landin' strip."

"I be dawg," Joe yawned, gazing at some axes racked about a post. "Must be *dinero* in the dude business."

The storekeeper shrugged. "Don't somehow seem like good country fer it, but I dunno. The whole outfit keeps to themselves. Truck in grub and such-like from El Paso, so Rishel is the only one I ever see. Fussy hombre about his mail. Comes in every day fer it himself, 'bout noon. You might wait an' hit him fer a job."

"Don't sound so good," Joe sighed, picking up his blanket roll. "Mebbe I'll wait, mebbe not. Thanks, anyhow."

"Say," the storekeeper called as Joe slouched away, "if you do wind up out there, remember me to Pop Sanborn." Joe stopped in the doorway. "He's the blacksmith, saddler and so-on," the storekeeper explained. "Ol'-timer with the Mescalero outfit, and they left him there as caretaker when the place was vacant. Rishel kept him on, mebbe because Pop likes the place and is too stubborn to move fer a grass fire. I bet he's crosswise of Rishel an' the dudes an' the other help too. Pop's a sidewinder."

Absently Joe nodded, went on out and eased himself down in the shade cast by the rickety flat roof of the *portal*. Hot wind tore at the soft-drink and tobacco signs nailed to the posts. Tiny swirls of sand spun along the bare ground. Having tugged the brim of his battered hat so as to better shade his eyes, Joe appeared to doze. He was too warm in his tattered coat, but he had to keep it on because the sleazy shirt beneath it didn't absolutely conceal the shoulder-holstered pistol strapped to his bare hide.

A train sped by, and an occasional car, but Joe paid them no heed. Presently a station wagon turned off the pavement and slid to a stop. It was a new and expensive job. The character who stepped out got close scrutiny by Joe. He looked like one of Hollywood's singing cowboys, and when he'd high-heeled into the store Joe rose, took up his gear and strolled toward the station wagon.

As the returning man walked toward him, shuffling a pack of letters in his lean hands, Joe took note of the quick nervous movements, the cagey look in the hard eyes as they raised to meet Joe's. "Howdy," Joe grinned, managing to look harmless as a pet rabbit. "Your name Rishel?"

Almost imperceptibly the man stiffened.

"Now don't git bowed up," Joe chuckled. "I ain't no panhandler. Jest droppud off a passin' freight—"

"Why drop off here?"

Joe shrugged. "Get gut-shrunk and wore out. I need a job an' this looked to be likely country. The jasper in the store said you might want a hand."

For what seemed like a full minute Rishel stared off toward Twin Buttes. "Where's your saddle?"

Having expected the question, Joe was ready. "Back in Texas," he chuckled ruefully. "Four of a kind won't beat a straight flush. I'm flatter'n a stove lid, Rishel, so I ain't holdin' out fer no ridin' job. Any kind o' squaw work will suit me fine."

"Come on," Rishel said, and in a moment they were off.

BESIDE Rishel, Joe sat with folded arms. Both were silent. Joe's head was lowered drowsily, as though he didn't give a damn what the country looked like. But he watched the odometer, the dirt road with its several turn-offs, and the cactus-dotted hills. When they'd covered the three curly miles

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and entered the ranch-yard, he knew he could—if need be—get back out of there in the dark. He knew, too, that Rishel had been raking him with sidelong glances.

As Rishel cut the motor they heard a bell clanging. Both stepped to the ground, and Rishel pointed out the mess-shack door. "Tell Fink, the foreman, that I sent you in," he directed. "After lunch, get busy at the woodpile beside the barn. You'll sleep in the tent there. Mind your own business and keep away from the guests."

"Aw right," Joe said amiably, shouldering his blanket. "Thanks." But when he'd turned his back to shamble toward the barn, his rather foolish grin turned to a scowl. *Don't let it throw you, Bud,* he cautioned himself. *Your turn will come.*

Entering the ragged sagging wall-tent by the woodpile, he tossed his roll onto the broken cot. Believing it wise to temporarily rid himself of the gun, and being almost certain the tent would be visited while he ate, he wrapped both gun and holster in a blue bandanna. After listening intently for a moment, he crawled out under the tent wall on the side away from the buildings, and clawed a depression in the litter of chips and bark on the ground. Caching the gun, he tossed some wood over the spot and went to lunch.

By mid-afternoon Joe was convinced he'd horned into a zany outfit. Rishel and his wife were not at home on the range. South Chicago would have been more their dish. And the six or eight guests (mostly unpleasant-looking men under forty) were not the usual well-fixed care-free Easterners having a high-heeled time in the wide-open spaces, but a shifty-appearing lot who did not inspire a feeling of unreserved trust.

Under snake-eyed Fink, their boss (and Joe would have bet Fink wasn't his name), the few corral hands were not convincing despite their rodeo clothes. Joe doubted that most of them could ride anything not on four wheels. He suspected that they were proficient, however, with lethal weapons at close range. And the cook and other household help were of the same breed, tough-as-tripe gals who might have been rounded up after a jail break.

This isn't going to be easy, he mused as he worked the scrub cedar up into firewood. *I've maybe got my tail in a crack. Guess I'll go have a look at that blacksmith.*

He had, of course, seen Pop Sanborn at the noon meal. Glaring like a testy bull the old mossy-horn had stalked in, downed his grub and stalked out again without so much as a nod or word for the rest. And they'd seemed relieved when he'd gone.

Taking up the dull iron wedge he'd been using to split tough chunks, Joe ambled off toward the shop. He passed the bunkhouse where, it seemed, help of his low status were not tolerated. He passed the storehouse, the door of which was open; and the small adobe building used as an office. Just as he cleared its corner a yellow convertible rolled into the yard and stopped.

Joe's quick eyes saw the New York license plate, the green scarf and sun-glasses the driver wore. With complete self-assurance she stepped to the ground, but Rishel was there to block further intrusion. Side-stepping him she looked about. "I was told that this is a dude ranch," she said. "Is that—"

"Who told you?"

Quickly Joe had stepped to the edge of the zinnia bed along the flagstone walk. Dropping to his knees he began to putter around the flowers. His ears were cocked, and with the tail of his eye he could still see the girl.

". . . but the dust and heat got me down and I need a rest," she was saying, peeling off her gloves. "They told me at the gas station back on the highway—"

"But you have no reservation," Rishel cut in again.

"Well, tuck me in somewhere for a few days," she smiled, removing the scarf and shaking out her short dark curls. "I've heard so much about Western hospitality, and I'm sure—"

"All right, all right!" Rishel snapped as she handed him a piece of luggage.

As Rishel led the way into the house, Joe grinned. *Determined brat,* he decided, rising.

There stood Fink. "Listen, punk," Fink said through his teeth. "Mind your own business or get put to bed with a shovel."

Joe wanted to wring the foreman out like a bar rag, but he managed to look meek. "Okay," he said. "I jest seen weeds in this

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garden, but if you don't want 'em pulled, okay." Then he moved away. The arrival of that girl disturbed him. Her presence might complicate things.

AS HE entered the dingy blacksmith shop, Pop didn't look up till he'd finished shaping a bit of hot iron and plunged it into the water tub. "Well?" he said then, sociable as a sore-pawed bear.

"Howdy," Joe grinned, laying his wedge on the anvil. "Jasper down to the store says you're an ol'-timer here."

Pop seemed to soften a little. "Yep, me'n that ol' chuck-wagon." He waved his tongs toward the wheeled relic, its canvas cover tattered and gray, standing opposite the storehouse doorway. "These here scaly hombres keep that fer scenery, but they jest as soon part with me."

Joe raised his eyebrows. "Why?"

Pop spat into the forge, and his weather-faded eyes narrowed. "Bub," he said, "you can't be as dumb as you look, and I somehow doubt that you are. You know as well as me that these buzzards—includin' them so-called dudes—is counterfeits. Mebbe you are too, fer all I know, so don't curdle my disposition by snoopin' around here. Come back fer your wedge in the mornin'."

With a shrug Joe ambled out. Aside from seeing that Pop bunked in his shop and had a remodeled Springfield handy to his bed, Joe had learned little. He particularly wanted to know where that plane and landing strip were. On that knowledge might depend on his chance of success.

He thought about it while—just before supper—and broke out shaving gear and a clean shirt. After eating, he stood leaning against the hitch-rail from where he could see the office. One of the phony wranglers, a hard-looking outfit called Eric, was lounging on a bench beside the office door; and there he stayed till another known as Carl left the mess shack and relieved him. *They never leave that office unguarded,* Joe observed, watching Eric head for the kitchen. *The safe must be there.*

Presently some of the dudes—the new girl among them—left the house and stood looking about at the encircling hills. Joe heard her exclaim at the piled-up clouds, and the color left by the setting sun. It was plain as paint to him that only she was interested in the scenery. The rest were just riding close herd on her.

As dusk closed in they all went back inside; and still Joe loitered, causually rolling and smoking one cigarette after another. Shortly two men hurried from the house to the row of open car ports, backed out the station wagon and moved quietly away down the road.

Careful not to make any hurried movement, Joe pinched out his smoke and faded into the deepening shadows. From the top of the ridge behind his tent he could perhaps catch glimpses of those twin tail-lamps. That wagon could be headed for the landing strip.

But he didn't get far. As he slithered past the barn his arm was clutched in a grip that would have choked a bull calf. "Rishel's wife wants to see you," the captor chortled, turning Joe about. "Wants to get your name and all straight on the payroll."

"Aw right," Joe said. "I was haulin' out fer bed, but it'll suit me first rate to git straight on the payroll. I'm obliged to you fer botherin'." Not even a mute protest did he make about the painful grip on his arm although, having the strength and know-how, he could easily have broken it and the hoodlum's wrist as well. He was saving that for later on.

When propelled into the now-lighted office, he dragged off his hat and grinned at the plump blonde seated at the desk. "Howdy, ma'am."

Her eyes, hard and green as malachite, flicked to Carl, Joe's captor; and Carl released his grip and stood leaning against the door-jamb. Then she gave Joe a smile which was no more than a baring of teeth. "You're name's Tull, isn't it? Joe Tull. That right?"

"Yes'm," Joe mumbled, staring at the floor. This gal, he saw now at close range, was sharp as a cactus stab; sharper, even, than her husband.

"Well, Joe—" She ground out her cigarette. "We hope you'll enjoy being with us. I suppose you're a veteran, and won't be involved in this new draft?"

"I don't guess so." Joe was fiddling with his hat, wishing he dared take a better look at the safe he'd spotted in a shadowy cor-

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ner. "Hope not, anyhow. I wasn't no shakes as a soldier. Reckon I'm too thick-headed."

"No, Joe!" Her smiled widened, but as he raised his head he saw in her eyes a look which plainly said he was a damned liar. Then a car (perhaps the returning station wagon) appeared and its lights went out. Carl cleared his throat and the blonde seemed to lose interest in Joe. "Good night," she said, rising. "I remember reading somewhere that a too sharp man is apt to cut his own throat. Don't get hurt, Joe."

As he sauntered to his tent he admitted to himself that he wasn't getting by; that Rishel, being suspicious, had only hired him to have him close for observation rather than running around loose. *If I'd bail out now I could maybe get away; but if I stick around I'll wind up a first-class disaster, like as not. Anyhow, I've found the safe,* he reflected, kneeling to retrieve his gun.

But the gun was one.

OBVIOUSLY, someone had watched him conceal it. Obviously, someone was watching him all the time, probably even now. He felt his hair stand up like the roach on a buck antelope. Now that the gun was gone he had only the four numerals on the inside of the sweatband of his hat. They were inconspicuous and could have been a cleaner's identification. But they were not. He'd memorized them; but sometimes, in excitement, a man forgets. They were his ace in the hole, an ace which he now might not have the opportunity to play.

Not having slept since leaving that town back yonder where he'd changed his clothes and hopped the freight, he was worn and weary as a fresh-branded calf. But he dared do no more now than lie back and rest.

The presence of the girl bothered him. Kay Jackson, he'd heard her called. Had all the earmarks of a finishing school brat from Park Avenue or Long Island. Undoubtedly a nice kid who'd be in a jackpot when the lid blew off, as it surely would.

What bothered him more was his next move. Being so closely watched literally hamstrung him. Maybe it would be smart to make no move, just wait and see what happened, devise his tactics as the situation developed. Meantime, maybe the Jackson girl would pull foot.

But, come morning, she appeared at the corral dressed for riding. Leaning on his axe at the woodpile Joe watched her, and even though he didn't go much for women, he had to admit that in chokebore breeches and thin yellow shirt she was a toothsome-looking wench.

As Eric, bridle in hand, was trying to corner a gelding in the corral (apparently Eric couldn't throw a rope down a well and was too smart to try), Kay sat on a bench beside the saddle-room door. She was polishing her sun-glasses. Casually laying aside the axe Joe sauntered that way, enroute to the blacksmith shop. Intent on rolling a cigarette, he hardly looked up as he came abreast of her. But, letting the strings of his tobacco sack fall from his teeth, he stooped to pick up the sack and caught her eye. "Get out of here," he muttered.

At once Carl stepped from the barn. "Say somethin', Tull?"

Joe's eyes widened. "Me? I jest cussed 'cause I dropped my smokin'."

Carl looked at Kay. "He botherin' you?"

She shook her head. "I swear sometimes myself. Skip it."

Joe shambled on, wondering if she'd really heard what he'd said. Too bad he'd chanced it, for if Carl weren't convinced, she'd be suspected of being teamed with Joe Tull. *Calculated risk, as the top-level brass say,* he thought with a wry smile as he entered the shop.

Pop had left off shaping a new edge on Joe's wedge, and was watching Eric's attempts to catch up a pony. "That filly what blowed in last evenin' is sure upsettin' the routine," he remarked, narrowly eyeing Joe. "Only other o' them so-called dudes I ever see fork a horse is that young fancy-pants they call Juarez. He pokes around some, two three times a week, mostly in the cool of the day after sundown."

Joe was watching Carl who, apparently satisfied that no mischief was afoot at the moment, was stalking into the bunkhouse. "Quiet kind o' place for that kind of a Mex'kin to spend a vacation," Joe yawned.

"Claims this high dry country is good fer his health." With a sniff Pop turned back to work.

Joe didn't answer. Bending over, Kay Jackson was adjusting a spur. Then she

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straightened, rose, and started toward the shop with the spur in her hand. Eric called to her; but she didn't pause, just held up the spur, gave some word of explanation, and came on. Both Carl and Eric knew that Joe Tull was in the shop. Not so good.

Stepping inside she ignored Joe. "Do you have a leather punch?" she asked Pop. "This strap needs a new hole." As Pop took the spur she looked at Joe. "Why the cops'n-robbers stuff, Mac?"

"Thanks for covering up for me. I meant what I said."

"I thought the West wasn't wild any more."

"This part of it is apt to wild up pretty quick. I'd like it better if you weren't underfoot."

"Oh, boy, just like the movies." Her smile was mocking. "Heigh-ho, Silver, and all such stuff. That I must see."

"You may be sorry," Pop muttered, busy with the punch. "I've smelt rats and know the scent. It's right powerful hereabouts, and worse since this maverick showed up. He don't nowise remind me of a Boy Scout, but he done you a good turn in warnin' you, and I'd pull foot. Moreover, twixt now an' the time I went, I'd keep tight-lipped as a hip pocket about him tellin' you."

She nodded. "I will do that, but if Mac's gonna make like a bad man, I'm gonna watch, and—Oh-oh, Eric is ready. Why, he's saddled two horses! He must be going to show me around."

"Just try and have a minute to yourself here, Brat," Joe gibed. "And if you don't come back, who shall we notify?"

As she stuck out her tongue at him and ran, Pop spat into the fire. "Crazy as a coot," he observed. "But likeable."

"If you like 'em bull-headed," Joe growled.

"Got the earmarks of a thoroughbred." Pop resumed work. "That kind is dependable in any kind o' weather. Till jest now, when I see her close, I figured mebbe you'n her was workin' together. I see, though, that she's a lady."

"And I'm just a simple roustabout."

"Huh." Pop doused the sharpened wedge in the water. "If you're a-goin' to crack that safe them weasels is so careful of, I wish to hell you'd get at it so the air wouldn't be so full o' somethin' about to happen. Man an' boy I've always been on the side o' the law, but in this case I ain't takin' sides because they look even crookeder than you. Should you make out to steal 'em blind, mebbe they'll pull stakes an' leave me be."

Joe took the finished wedge off the anvil. "Did I hear somebody mention a plane?"

Pop nodded. "Rishel's got one lashed down yonder beyond the mesa." He jerked his thumb eastward. "Every so often he goes kitin' off to Denver. Now I ain't a-goin' to tell you no more, lest what little conscience I got will pester me later. Rattle your hocks out o' here. Git."

BACK at the woodpile Joe worked, and kept his eyes open. Just before lunch Kay and Eric returned. All afternoon the place was peaceful as a church, but Joe knew it was only on the surface. He was being watched, discussed. It hardly seemed possible now to come off top dog in this business.

Soon after supper he saw Juarez start a leisurely ride over the hills, and shortly afterward Eric mounted and trotted off in another direction. No one else seemed to be about, though Joe—looking innocent as a watched Puritan as he sat on his heels by the corral gate—would have bet that Carl was not far away.

There were no sounds, save for the sullen mutter of thunder off toward the Rio Grande; and, as darkness came, the nightly yipping of coyotes. Pop's kerosene lantern made a dim glow in the shop, and lights came on in the house.

As Joe speculated on the layout of the place, and where the brat's room might be, a dark sedan rolled into the yard. It headed out again, and stopped. Quietly, almost furtively, the occupants disappeared into the house.

None of the ranch cars had been away, so these were newcomers. Who? From where?

Abruptly a clatter broke into Joe's thoughts, a sharp rattle of shod hoofs on the stony trail up out of Arroyo Hondo. Then a rider loomed in the darkness. "Fink!"

The voice was weak, and Joe saw the rider —silhouetted against the starlit sky—sway in

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the saddle, slump forward and slide headforemost to the ground. At once Carl appeared. "What's wrong, Eric?" he demanded, kneeling, and obviously forgetting that Joe was around.

"I croaked Juarez," Eric panted weakly. "Dam' gutless Border-jumper was runnin' out. Been scared that Joe Tull was an Immigration man. Juarez would a-been caught sure, and blabbed everything. I waylaid and slugged him with my persuader, but damned if he didn't have a gun and wing me as he fell. Now we'd better quit foolin' with this Joe Tull and finish him too. Why'd Rishel bring him here?"

"Less dangerous here than runnin' loose." Carl's voice was rough with tension.

"You'd better do somethin' about that New York chick, too," Eric gasped. "I don't trust—" Faltering, the voice stopped, and Carl ran toward the house.

Startled, Eric's pony sidled off. Catching the reins, Joe leaped into the saddle and left out for the gate. If he could find and disable that plane before Rishel skipped with the stuff from the safe—

Then he remembered the girl. Reining to a rearing halt he lit running toward the house, stopping only to snatch the ignition key from the newly-arrived sedan. Now, which was the window in her room, he wondered.

People came boiling out of the house by the front door. Joe ducked in among the hollyhocks along the end wall. He peered through the first window. The room was empty. So was the next. But in the third room he saw her, in dude pants and sweater, listening by her closed door. "Kay," he whispered urgently.

She whirled, and damned if she didn't have a stubby black gun in her fist. "You're a simply marvelous forecaster, Mac," she grinned, recognizing him through the screen. "What's cooking?"

"Everything, and on the front burners! Turn off that light and come on!" He yanked the screen loose. As he helped her across the sill he heard subdued but excited voices, and running feet.

They had just reached the sedan when a man bobbed up. Loosing Kay's arm Joe sidestepped and swung, his fist crashing into a blurred face. In a moment the motor was roaring and they sped away. Then Joe had to turn on the lights.

Something snapped past his ear and smashed the windshield. As he pushed Kay to the floor he felt a jolt, and a headlight went out. Then they overtook Eric's horse, fleeing from the turmoil. Swerving to pass it they met a third slug which tore into a front tire. Lurching off the road and down a slope, the car crashed to a stop in a greasewood thicket. He pulled Kay up. "Hurt?"

"Nope."

Opening the door he thrust her out. "Skip, then! Here, wait! Whoa, boy." Luckily catching the reins of the bewildered horse, he swung her up. "Keep off the road. Turn right up the first wash to—"

"Take this!" She thrust the gun into his hand and was gone, but before he could turn and fire the pursuit was on him like a landslide.

THEY tied him, much the worse for wear, but with his hat jammed tight on his head, in the dark storehouse. "We should a-killed him," Carl panted, holding the flashlight and a torn ear.

"Shut up, punk," Fink growled. "You'n the boys herd them others back in the house and keep 'em there. Watch them cars, too. Nobody leaves here, specially that girl. We gotta figure this out."

Carl limped away, but Fink and Rishel lingered just outside the open door. "Soon's it's daylight," Fink said, "we'll take Tull and Eric's gun up there, fix it to look like him and Juarez killed each other. Then notify the sheriff that one of our dudes is missing. That will—"

"Nuts to that," Rishel objected shakily. "Some of these old-time Westerners can trail a tick over hard rock. They'd read the whole story plain as plowed ground. Let's finish him off now."

"'Morning', I said," Fink insisted. "Don't forget, Rishel, that I'm the boss. You're front man only because you get by better and have a pilot's license."

"Okay. Maybe I'd better take the stuff and fly it to Denver right now. That way—"

"That way you'd be in the clear and wouldn't come back. You're stayin' right here with me, Rishel. I've fixed that plane motor so you can't fly till I say so. And I've

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changed the combination on the safe so you can't get the stuff. I don't intend to—"

As the voice faded, Pop crawled from behind sacked potatoes and touched Joe's arm. "I come off without my knife," he whispered. "But I'll fetch it and—"

"Get away from here before they remember to shut and lock that door, and remember to look for you!" Joe urged. "Yank this hat off my head and hurry with it to the railroad station at Redrock. There's a number inside the sweatband, a telephone number at One Butte where I've got *compadres*. Have the agent phone or wire that number and simply say—Baldwin."

Pop had barely slipped out before the door was closed and fastened.

Minutes later, though the thunder was increasing, Joe thought he heard shouts, a shot. *Hell, they've got him,* he fretted. *Now, unless that girl*— From what Fink had said, they didn't even suspect she was gone, but probably she'd either get lost, or be too rattled to tell a coherent story to the proper people in time to be of any use.

LYING on the stone floor, numb with cold and impaired circulation, his cuts and bruises throbbing, he damned himself for a sentimental slow-witted rool. Had he gone about his business and left her, even though he'd have wasted time hunting for the plane, he could probably have got back with help in time to save her. Now he was a goner and his job not done. In a few days, after no word from him, the boys would come; but meantime this gang would have removed any evidence from that safe, and could quite possibly talk fast enough to avoid indictment.

Shifting uneasily to avoid the sharp edge of a slightly raised stone that was cutting into his shoulder blade, he had an idea. By squirming about he finally had his wrist bindings over the edge and began the slow laborious movement that might sever the rope.

Time passed. The thunder was loud now, and frequent flashes of lightning lit up the dirty panes of the small barred window. He began to wonder how he'd get out of the place even though he did work loose. In his snooping about outside he'd glanced into the room and noticed a short bar (apparently used for opening crates) hanging from a nail in one of the log rafters supporting the low roof. If that were still there—

Faint sounds at the door jerked his mind back, and he twisted about to face it. Perhaps it was only gusts of wind preceding the storm, and— No, a flash of lightning showed the door partly open and a figure slipping in. *Carl, probably, bound to have his own way,* Joe guessed, straining desperately at his weakened wrist-bonds.

With a last agonizing effort he freed his rope-burned wrists. Whoever was coming was threading his way between boxes and barrels. Slowly, silently, and without light he moved; not because he feared the bound prisoner, but because he was disobeying Fink's orders and feared being stopped.

Though his ankles were still fast together, Joe rose quietly and groped upward for the bar that might be directly overhead. The back of his hand dislodged it. With a clang it fell to the floor.

Not waiting to find it, Joe dived at the intruder. As they crashed down the storm struck, drowning the man's cry, bitten off as his head struck the floor with a sickening thud.

Working swiftly Joe freed his own legs, tied and gagged his unconscious assailant, then clawed about for the gun the man had undoubtedly carried. The holster was empty, but he found the gun. Joe found the door, edged out, closed and fastened the door behind him, and vanished in the wet blackness.

NIGHT was about finished. Sickly bluish light came sifting over the rain-washed land, and the hills stood gray and sharp against a pale green sky. Peeping through a slit in the cover of the old chuck-wagon, Joe saw Fink and Rishel leave the office where they'd apparently spent the night. Rishel entered the storehouse while Fink stood peering about.

"Hey, Tull's gone!" Rishel yelled, running out. "Carl, the persistent fool, is in there all but dead, and—"

"Look!" Forgetting their duties as guards at the house, the bunkhouse crew came high-tailing toward the office. Behind them hurried the occupants of the house. These men,

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pale with fright, were unarmed; and the women, tousled Jezebels in bath-robes and whatever, were chattering like scared guinea hens.

"Quiet!" Fink snarled as they milled about him.

"But look!" A woman grabbed Fink's arm and pointed.

Joe looked too. The road, where it topped a mile-distant rise, was alive with cars, lurching and slithering in the mud, but making time.

"Let's get goin'!" Rishel yelped.

"Let's not!" Leaping from the wagon Joe loosed a shot over their heads. "Reach up and let those guns drop!"

Dumbfounded they obeyed, all but one. And that one was Fink. Sensing that Joe wouldn't shoot into the women, he deliberately raised his automatic and fired. Splinters flew from the wagon-box, but before they'd lit a rifle cracked somewhere and Fink collapsed like a dropped rope.

"Now into the storehouse." Joe ordered, wondering who was his ally.

Like sheep the thoroughly cowed group stepped all over themselves obeying, and Joe moved to where he could cover the doorway.

Just then the Arroyo Hondo spewed armed men, and Joe's guts went tight. These were not the quietly-efficient *compadres* expected in those cars. This was a wild-looking undisciplined crew bearing all manner of weapons. He swung his gun toward the charging leader.

"Hold your fire, Tull!" the old rooster yelled. "I'm the sheriff. We'll take over."

"Stop right there!" Joe ordered, skeptical as hell. "How come—"

"Okay, ma'am!" the sheriff called. And dogged if Kay Jackson didn't bob up.

"It's all right, Mac." She waved gaily. "Sis fetched the cavalry."

"I'm damned," Joe said. Nothing more, for the cars were skidding into the yard and businesslike hombres with automatics were deploying in all directions.

"What the hell?" the sheriff in turn demanded, and his crew raised their guns and faced the newcomers.

"Government men," Joe explained. "I sent for 'em."

Within minutes the prisoners were secured, the safe opened and its canned contents loaded into one of the cars. After a detail had been sent to find and bring in Juarez's body, and others were searching every inch of the premises, Joe's chief led Joe into the living-room of the house. There, perched on the end of a table, was the girl; and even despite splattered mud and a sleepless night she was easy to look at. Not so brash, though. Not quite. "My, they worked you over, didn't they, Mac." She showed real concern.

Backed up to the empty fireplace stood the sheriff, and Pop Sanborn with his Springfield was beside him. "Thank you both, gentlemen," Joe said, then fixed his eyes on Pop. "Old-timer; for all the wrinkles in your horns you can travel like a colt and shoot like— Was that you plugged Fink?"

Pop nodded. "And glad of the chanct, after I heard Eric's tale o' woe an' seen which side o' the hide the hair was appearing on."

"Now sit down, all of you," the Chief ordered. "I want some facts." He questioned Pop, then the sheriff, and dismissed them both with thanks. They shook hands with Kay, and on the way out Pop stopped in the doorway and aimed a finger at Joe.

"Mind what I tolt you 'about her bein' a thoroughbred and dependable," Pop advised. "A young buck like you could do worse than latch onto—"

Kay laughed outright. "You've practically read my mind, Pop," she said. "Wouldn't it kill you, but Mac had swept me clear off my wedgies even when I thought he was just a—"

Joe felt his bruised and stubbled face flare like a brush fire. "Now, Miss Jackson," the Chief said hastily, biting back a smile. "Mac, here, as you call him, reports that you blundered into this place supposing it to have been a legitimate guest ranch. Is that correct?"

To Joe's utter astonishment she shook her head. "I didn't blunder. I purposely detoured into here on the way to the Coast to see what the place was being used for."

"What business was it of yours?"

She shrugged. "I practically own it, through inheritance. When my lawyer reported that he'd leased it for use as a dude ranch, I knew the jigger who'd taken it was

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either completely screwy or a crook, for this is strictly not dude country."

She paused to light a fresh cigarette, then went on. "A little snooping around Denver where this Rishel signed the lease disclosed that he was a licensed pilot and owned a plane, and that he frequently flew up there on business. Oh-oh, I thought. Perhaps he's flying foreigners-without-passports up from Mexico. Down I came for a look."

"But, Miss Jackson," the Chief objected, "you should have reported your suspicions to the Immigration people instead of taking your own time and endangering your life. Besides, your barging into the picture might have upset our carefully laid plans."

Exhaling a cloud of smoke, she crinkled her eyes as they flicked to Joe. "Then I never would have known Mac, Cap. What's your real name, Mac?"

"Oh, for—" Rising sharply, Joe rammed his fists into his pockets and stamped to the nearest open window where it was cooler. "My name's Baldwin," he fumed. "And as might be expected, you were wrong as hell."

"My, he needs food and sleep, Cap," she grinned at the Chief. "If I was so wrong, what—"

"Heroin, smuggled in from Chihuahua," the Chief explained. "We're Bureau of Narcotics agents. That wounded man you knew as Fink is one Herzig, henchman for the Denver representative of a notorious New York City gang. The lad they called Juarez was an educated Mexican kid gone wrong, the emissary of the poppy growers and dope sellers below the Border.

"The rest, other than the bunkhouse goons and Rishel and the female help, were couriers who (provided with forged papers) brought in some of the stuff in small quantities—in the inner tubes of spare tires, sewed in a shirt tail, taped in a hatband and what have you. Greater quantities were flown over here and dropped in parachutes. Mr. Baldwin was selected to sift in here because —having been raised on a Texas ranch— he was more likely to get by in the role needed. He's done an excellent job, and—"

"Omit the citation, please, Chief," Joe protested, turning from the window. "But I would appreciate a few weeks leave."

"You may have it." Rising, the Chief pocketed his pencil and notes. "But where do you plan to be, in case—" Stopping in the doorway he waited.

Grinning, Joe inclined his head toward Kay Jackson. "Wherever this nuisance is, from now on out."

THERE WAS A GOLD STRIKE in Wild Horse Valley; cowboys traded their high-heels for mining boots, and those who still stuck to cattle rode with prospector's picks in their holsters instead of guns. . . . . .

"The Deception Trail"

A long novelette of Henry, the amazing sheriff of Wild Horse Valley. . . by

W. C. TUTTLE

In the next SHORT STORIES

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One of the Prisoners Came of an Old Mining Family, and the Guard Thought There Might Be Something in It for Him

THE TRAIL WAS RIGHT

By CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

BOYKIN, the trusty of the county prison camp, pointed through the brush down the ledge trail. Culmer, the boss road guard, eased his gun across the saddle and lowered his head. Something moved against the broken rock below the old Lang mine. A dog, watching either the guard or little Steve Lang, to whom Boykin pointed.

"Look," grinned the trusty. "I brought yeh here to see! Jim Lang's kid working the creek bars below that old placer wash. Pannin' gold!"

"Panning sand. Plenty old guys still

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make whiskey money sniping the creeks. No more. This gulch played out forty years ago."

"Yeh, but this is different. You ain't been here long. That water's tricklin' from the old mine entry. The first Lang was a '49er. This been Lang property ever since. They tried fer hard rock and then built a sluice fer placer. But it didn't wash pay dirt."

"Sure not." Culmer grunted indifferently. "Work and water—that's all they ever got. Now Jim's in the work gang fer that little shootin' up the valley. Didn't have enough money for a lawyer. Where's that dog now?"

"Musta been ol' Pelter, Cap Anstey's wonder hound. But look—I saw shine in the kid's ol' rusty pan! He's siftin' pay outa that bar!"

"Pan's enough in a week to get to a movie mebbe. Get along, feller, back to your water-buck job." The boss guard touched his reins. The thin-faced trusty hung back, whispering. "Look now! He's tiltin' his pan. I saw color! Look, he's scrapin' stuff into that ol' buckskin poke in his belt." Boykin sniggered up past the saddle. "Now, if he's been at that all summer, an' them Lang's bein' an' ol' minin' family, mebbe the kid's got somethin'. That ol' county hill hound keeps watchin' him. Or mebbe us—"

The heavy-faced guard looked back, then grunted, "On your way—you been away too long from that rock gang. I'll ride down the cut-off trail to camp."

The trusty shuffled off from the ledge to the scrub pine and boulders. Culmer watched him out of sight. Down the canyon came the faint heavy grumble of a dynamite shot in the rock face where the prison work gang was roughing out the bed of a hill road. He could see a thin film of dust around a bare cliff. Up here silence. Hardly a mountain jay moved in the heat.

Culmer tried to see the weed-grown rubble, the dump below the ancient tunnel. "Gold, eh? I talked with that Lang kid a couple Sundays when he brought some clothes and cookin' to his old man. Yeh, I heard him tell Cap Anstey he was goin' to have dough enough to hire a smart lawyer and get a new trial for Jim Lang; spring his dad outa jail by workin' somewhere. Everybody grinned about it. So this is his job—pannin' sand been worked over since '49. Joke!"

But the camp guard's little eyes narrowed slowly. He saw the Kid again. Little Steve Lang, maybe fourteen years old, squatted in the shallow creek washing sand from a bar. Sifting with easy swings of a rusty pan, then watching the rim closely, then fingering it and then twisting his little poke about to put the stuff in. The buckskin bagged looked nearly full. Culmer eyed it closely. Then the Kid bent over the sand with a broken shovel. His faded checked shirt was so much the color of the bar and the rubble that until he moved he was hard to see. Then something shone in the sun. Culmer crouched to see.

"Hey, that's a little nugget! Damn if he ain't findin' something. All the water in this branch now is just a trickle from the old mine but he's washin' stuff! How long he been at it?"

Culmer recalled that Boykin had said the Kid had been panning the bars all summer. Money to spring his old man out of jail. Culmer hated Jim Lang, and it must be because old Captain Anstey ran a fair camp for all his crew but seemed pretty friendly to this Lang. Lang held himself better than most prisoners, Culmer thought. Had a pretty good education. And he wasn't a well man, an arrested T.B. case Cap had said, and that rock work must be hard, the dust and all. And Cap argued that the shooting affair across the Sacramento couldn't have been bad when Lang got only two years for wounding a drunken townie in a barroom mixup. Assault with deadly weapon—Lang got off lightly Culmer thought. Culmer would have liked to make it hard for Lang in the wire stockade but couldn't do much with old Anstey in charge—Cap who was known to run a fair camp.

"Gold, eh? Got a little nugget that time. Well, he done well for today. Coming out feeling pretty chipper now!"

The Kid was coming on along the shelf whistling cheerily. He even swung his poke after hefting it again. Culmer waited. A mile down the side canyon were some rotting, deserted cabins, an ancient ghost camp of the Sixties. Lang property; they had owned worthless hill and bottom here for decades before the Espee crossed the Divide. The Kid must be baching it down there alone for the Lang girl was teaching school somewhere near Marysville. Culmer recalled

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that they'd had tried chickens and fruit on a tiny bottom ranch up here, too.

"Both them Langs saving money hoping to spring their old man outa the Law! Well, fer love o'—"

The Kid had yelled just as he saw Culmer's horse. He had been swinging his poke and the thong broke. A tiny circle of free gold glittered as it fell. The Kid was down on his knees swearing softly as he hunted it from the rock. Culmer touched his horse on a yard.

"Hey, boy! That was tough. Mebbe I can help."

"No, I was just singin' crazy. I'll worry it all up again."

"Been friskin' these old bars? Guess it don't pay much." Culmer eyed the poke which the Kid had now shoved behind his strap belt.

"No. It don't pay to fool with 'em but I ain't much to do. We ain't raisin' chickens no more. Just a little fruit mebbe." But he laughed and Culmer considered. Something must be good when little Steve laughed. He must have a tough time living alone in an ancient shack among other ghost cabins. Ethel came up after her school week sometimes and brought him store stuff. Steve took it to his dad. Ethel wouldn't go there, for Jim Lang had sternly forbidden his girl to do so. His son was different; you could figure little Steve a man up here.

"How's that big sister? Heard she was in a wreck."

"Yeah. Down the Valley highway. Wasn't much I hear."

STEVE looked the boss guard over sharply. He'd never spoken so friendly before. Steve's round face was parchment colored from sun and wind, his hands hard and lined from work, his gray eyes were set in wrinkles a boy shouldn't have, but his grin was broad and confident.

Culmer grinned back. "Well, I guess sometimes you pick up a chunk the old timers missed. Bound to, ain't you?"

"Well, a feller can hope. But it's pretty hard work."

"I guess. But it ain't so hard as your dad got down that road, and he ain't built for heavy goin'. Ain't so well now."

The Kid started. "What you mean? Not sick agin?"

"No. Not sick. Just wore down. Oughtn't to be there, boy."

"I know. I'm workin' an' savin' to git an appeal, a new trial, or somethin' like the lawyer said. Them county politicians give him a bad deal. The feller he winged was in with 'em sure."

"I bet so. There ain't no justice fer a poor man. Jim ought to find his way out that damn stockade sometime. Well, I'm goin'."

He touched his horse. The Kid ran alongside looking up.

"What you mean—out? You mean he could?"

"Now, look here, boy. I'm a state man, and ain't talkin'. Of course a man gets sprung outa stir sometimes with the right lawyer an' all. But it takes money—lotta money. Sometimes a man in these work camps takes a run-out. Hide away somewhere's an' later get their troubles fixed up. You got to know how and who."

Little Steve looked at him sharply, cunningly. Culmer went on: "A man who ain't well ought to try help himself. And worried about his girl in an automobile smash, too. If she was bad hurt he ought to get out and go see her."

"Look?" said Steve, glancing about at the lifeless hills: "You mean—escape?"

"Hell, not me! You better not talk like that to me. But if somebody came and talked to you—Say, Bud, how much that gold you got?"

"I dunno. I can't weigh it. I panned all summer. But it—it's some. I got it cached safe—" He looked around sharply and whispered, "If I paid somebody Dad could get out, hide out, and then—"

"If he heard his girl was bad hurt I bet he'd try it. Say, why don't you write your pa a line sayin' she is hurt pretty bad?"

"But she ain't. Well, I see, Mister. You got me to thinkin'—"

"I ain't tellin' you a thing to do or not. But suppose somebody came to see you? How much you got, you think? Couple hundred bucks?"

The Kid's eyes gleamed. "I bet more'n that. Sure more. Say, you mean I deal with some guy from camp? I could pay somebody—"

"Young feller, I'm goin'. Don't talk to me. But if—"

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"When's this?" Steve gasped." How?"

"Now wait. Be here about sundown an' talk business. Trust this guy. Write a little note an' give him. To your dad. Make it kinda strong about Ethel. Don't ever mention me. Listen to what this guy tells you. So long, Kid. I'm a man likes to see folks get a square deal, law or no."

HE RODE on leaving the Kid staring at the old Lang mine.

Then Steve yelled after Culmer, "Say, your dog ain't follerin' you! Took back up the hill."

"What dog?" Culmer stopped and swung about. He saw the hound sneaking along through the brush above the trail. "Oh, that old scoundrel, Pelter. He's no good; too old and worn out to run with the camp pack." He shouted at the hound which seemed watching him intently, "Get back there you. If I run the camp you'd got a load of lead long ago."

But he was disturbed for some reason. That decrepit hound had never followed him before, and watched him in this full-eyed stare. Steve Lang crossed up the slope and rubbed the dog's head. "Sure, I know this dog, too. Cap Anstey told me about him. He was the famous old county dog years back they said. Pelt, that's his name?"

"Yeah. But he never leaves the gate any more. They just feed him down there outside the pen. Like he was on a pension Cap said. A wore-out hound is no good to me any time."

The old hound was quiet under the boy's hand. But his watery eyes never left the mounted man. Gray and thin, sunken ribs and a little tremble to his legs as he slowly walked. Everybody in camp, prisoners and guards and office men knew about Pelter. Captain Anstey was never done with telling them. Never such a wonder dog according to Cap.

"I'm goin' to give him some of my grub poke," said Steve Lang. He tucked his gold sack tighter under belt and turned back. Culmer watched that closer. Fatter than he thought. He raised his voice.

"Say, you know something, Kid? The Gover'ment won't let a man keep gold. You got to turn it all in at their price. Hell, they can jail a man fer hidin' out gold!"

"Yeh? Seems like I heard something like that. There ain't any gold money anymore sure. What happens to it anyhow?"

"You got to sell it quiet. You got to have it handled right. Well, I know a guy who can talk it over. If you want money—well, I got to be going." He rode down the canyon. The Kid seemed busy pulling burrs from the dog's legs. But a mile down the road where Culmer turned off to the wire stockade in the bottoms he discovered the hound off to one side among the willows sneaking along. When he pulled up at the gate and waved to the day guard there old Pelter was curled in the dust outside the pen where the four young camp hounds roved and greeted him questioningly, wanting their daily exercise run.

CULMER went to the tin-roofed office. The deputy at the desk said that Captain Anstey had telephoned that he wouldn't be back today from the county seat. Culmer was in charge for twenty-four hours, and he hardly concealed his satisfaction. At the noon meal Boykin waited on the table for the three men off duty. The little truck came back from its trip up to the rock job with the grub for the work gang.

Boykin didn't speak to the boss guard, but when Culmer went out he grunted to the trusty aside, "I got something for you outside this evening. You needn't be seen around at check-in mebbe."

Boykin got it. He sniggered wisely and went on with his dishes. Boykin would do whatever Culmer said. Culmer had had a line on the trusty ever since he got out of the Arizona pen—and Culmer could put him back for a broken parole if he had wanted to. Boykin was handy in a good many ways to the boss guard; he could relate about everything that was said in the barracks, talk among the fifty-four inmates. There were some things in Culmer's Arizona days that could be made to look bad, too, if the Prison Board knew of them. Little grafting jobs on the gambling houses when Culmer had been a Tucson policeman. Not much, but a sniveler like Boykin could make him look bad—if he talked. He wouldn't. He might get life back there, as a three-termer already, if Culmer talked. He wouldn't. They had a full understanding.

The wired stockade was hot and silent that afternoon until the gang was fetched

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back in the trucks with the gun guards swinging behind. A pretty decent lot of prisoners, for this was a fair camp Cap ran.

Culmer saw Jim Lang, the last through the gate as the guard checked them in. Lang was taller than most, but a bit stooped, looking older than his forty-five years. A tired man nursing a secret grievance that he had been done wrong by the Law. Well, all prisoners thought so. Culmer idled at Cap Anstey's desk in the little bare office until the clatter ceased at the cookhouse. He went to the gate, passed a word with the man on duty and continued on inspection along the high close twelve-wire stockade. Behind the barracks he met Boykin as they had agreed during the supper confusion. Culmer muttered:

"As I said. I'm sendin' you out to look up some tools left down at the work head. The Lang boy'll be up the trail a piece. You tell him about eleven, mebbe, he'll meet his old man. Now you got to bait Jim Lang on in the bunkhouse talkin' easy. His girl is bad off, understand, and must see him. Mebbe she's dyin'—understand? But first, when you meet the Kid, tell him to fetch his gold poke. All of it—mebbe a thousand bucks for all we know. And listen—" Culmer's hand twisted the trusty's arm. "You're playin' straight with me—get me?"

Boykin whispered a laugh: "Oh, sure—boss, since we both work together, sure I do."

"O.K." Culmer turned away with a brief glance at the gate guard. After awhile he sauntered there and told young Bailey that it was all right for Boykin to pass out and back any time up to midnight.

BAILEY nodded. Culmer was in charge with Captain Anstey away. Culmer made brief inspection of quarters. Within an hour lights out; the stockade quiet save for the snores and tossings of tired men in the barracks. The dogs were belly-full and contented. But just outside the gate Culmer saw old Pelt sitting bolt upright watching the dark hills. The old pensioner was fed outside or he'd get nothing from the younger hounds. Culmer reflected again that he would feel more satisfied if Cap's favorite was missing some night.

Culmer saw, from the dim light in the office, that Boykin came through the gate before eleven, carrying a few rusty drills. The trusty glanced at the office porch and went directly to the bunkhouse. Culmer thought he shouldn't contact him at once in view of what might be talked tomorrow. But he knew what Boykin was to do next. Presently the boss guard went out, yawned and sat in a chair opposite the gate man. It was easy to contrive so that Bailey sat about watching the dark hills when Culmer suggested that there must be a brush fire up beyond the second ridge. Bailey couldn't see it but now he didn't face the barracks with the single bright light above the wired door. Culmer said he couldn't sleep and he'd smoke outside for a time with Bailey.

"That damn old hound, Pelt, he don't sleep either tonight," the young guard grinned. "Rovin' around restless like, ain't he?"

"Yeah. The pack'd run better if he wasn't outside when they go. But Cap won't get shut of him." Culmer kept up a casual conversation, but all the time his glance was on the barrack door. Then he saw what he wanted. Jim Lang slipping out and around the corner to the shadows. That was it. Boykin had put it over. Told Lang where to go around in the dimness behind the iron-roofed building. Bailey hadn't noticed a thing. Culmer kept on talking sleepily; once he saw Boykin, a shadow in the doorway. Culmer waited fifteen minutes before he went into the office and then through to the sleeping quarters in the rear. Boykin was at the window beyond Culmer's bed. No lights here. The second night guard was reading in their quarters next to the office. Then Culmer heard Bailey chuckle:

"Hey, Slats! Old Pelt has started to the hills, nose down as if he was trailing something."

"Let him. Take a polecat to start his nose workin'." Slats read on. As usual, a quiet night, with the heavy stupor about the camp of tired men. Bright light at the gate. Bright light above barracks door. As usual.

But at the back window of his room Culmer was seething. He clutched Boykin's wrist on the sill. "What you sayin'? The Kid didn't come through with that stuff?"

Boykin whispered a snigger. "Didn't have it along. But he will next we meet. I laid it out strong. I didn't say I cut the wires to him or Jim Lang either. I just told Jim

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where to go, and the Kid to wait. At first Lang didn't want to run out but I put it strong, his girl about dead and his boy waitin' up the hill. Lang wasn't grateful, you'd say. Just snarled at me, but he went. I saw him on the crawl under the wires. I put the wirecutters back and wiped the handle. How Lang got 'em is nobody's business. Don't get excited, boss. They'll pay."

"You kept my name out of it?"

"Not a peep about you nor anybody. I did it, feelin' sorry for Lang. See? They'll pay. I told the kid if he didn't come across that I'd see the dogs had his dad back in forty-eight hours."

"That's the hell of it. I don't want him back. He can make the state line, or into the big timber over the ridge if he wants. If he was fetched back he might spill something. It would look funny."

"You ain't in it, boss. Sure we don't want Lang back. Say—"

Bailey, at the gate, had called to Slats in their quarters. "Put down that gun magazine, boy, an' listen. Listen sharp!"

On the utter silence of the hill midnight came the faint, far baying of a hound. Long drawn, mournful, all the grief in the world.

"Pelter," Bailey muttered. "Took out on a lone trail. Why that old hound is so weak an' old he can't hardly travel. Hear him, boy."

Culmer and Boykin in the darkness heard it now. Culmer grunted:

"Now that's damn funny. Suppose—tomorrow, after they find a run-out—that damned dog took the lead? Him runnin' free—and we don't want Lang found. I want that Kid's gold poke and to hell with em!"

"We'll get it. The kid'll be scared, trying to keep his dad hid."

"Stow your gab. Get back to the bunks. I'm turnin' in before them two boys at the gate notice us talkin'. Nothin' to be said or done 'til after mornin' check-up. Then I take over. You're out of it, see? I investigate, and start them dogs. I want to be out where mebbe I can control 'em. I'll take that day man, Rodgers, who's new here and don't know about workin' dogs. Don't you make a move to see that Kid or get the payoff. Not till I say to. Mebbe I can handle it now."

Boykin vanished in the shadows. Culmer turned in but he didn't sleep much. He found himself straining for the faint, sad cry of a hound. Maybe a lost dog now. Maybe too weak and old ever to travel ridges and canyons back again if he followed a man trail too far. No, Culmer didn't sleep; he had to take on a manhunt and make it look right; but above all, he had to get the pay-off and shut the Kid's mouth about it. He could do that last all right—if he didn't have to find Jim Lang. A mighty good thing that Captain Anstey was down the valley tonight and tomorrow. A good thing, too, that he could take a green hand with him tomorrow. Rogers wouldn't notice things that Bailey or Slats Green would, if they helped work the hound pack. He wondered what Jim Lang would do when he found he had been enticed out about a dying daughter, and there was nothing to it. What the Kid would do when he had to explain. He knew what Boykin would do. Deny everything, absolutely, no matter what Lang might say if he had to be recaptured. One prisoner's word ought to be good as another's. It might; except with old Captain Anstey who was a fair man—but shrewd.

Culmer finally slept towards daylight, but he hear the harsh gong, that the last night guard struck to get the cookhouse gang out for its first jobs. Culmer didn't get up. He didn't need to and he was going to dawdle when he did, delay the discovery and then the hunt as long as he could without it looking funny to Bailey and the others.

He heard the boys talking at the gate, and the bustle in the cookhouse shed. Smelt the alleged coffee and fried pork. Then the call for the barracks turn-out.

CULMER closed his eyes and waited. More low talk and then Rogers went along the line of listless men. Then he shouted Lang's name. There was silence, then he called Bailey from the cookhouse shed and breakfast.

"Maybe he didn't turn out. Maybe he's sick. Go look."

Rogers went to the barracks. He came back and whispered to Bailey.

"Better get Culmer out." He sent the work gang to breakfast. Bailey went into the shed and began questioning them. Rogers strode swiftly to Culmer's bed back of the office. "We looked in and out. Lang's gone."

"What the hell? "Culmer yawned. "Hid

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out in the yard somewhere. Look around. Bring him here."

"He's gone, I tell you. Better keep the men in stockade till we look outside, hadn't we?"

"Yeah." Culmer was dressing slowly. "What Bailey say?"

"Nothin'. Just a quiet night." Rogers went out to see the night guards again. Culmer joined them and listened. The sun was over the dry hills now. In the cookshed men were whispering, grumbling. The whole camp was alert now. Culmer started along the wires. Presently he called the night guards.

"Yeah, he's on the lam. Got wire cutters somehow from the shop. Clipped the wires along low down by this ditch. Well, another damn fool. Better see to them dogs, Bailey. Then Rogers and I'll take the trail. He won't get far. What do guys do it for—and get three months extry, on the hard end, too? Lang'd been out inside a year anyhow."

CULMER went to breakfast, sullen but watchful. Then he went out the gate with young Rogers holding the hounds in hand until they found trail. That was easy around the corner of the stockade where the clipped wire ends lay in the dust. The camp dogs became suddenly alert.

"Take it easy, Rogers," Culmer grunted. "You never been out on a real manhunt before. And these hounds Cap's got now ain't the best ever. Need training with an old dog."

Rogers gave them their head through young spruce to a bare rock slope, then bigger timber. Nellie, the lead dog was sure and eager. Young Rogers was keen to understand and follow. Culmer grumbled in the rear. He didn't want to get Jim Lang back—not if he could get a thousand bucks for missing him. He was a bit suspicious now of the Lang boy. "But he better come across with that stuff. If he don't. I can take his dad back and make life hell for him on extry time he gets." He yelled at Rogers. The dogs were racing up and down the edge of the shallow creek. "Sure a man would take to water if he could and come out below or above. Take it easy, wait and see."

Nellie was across upstream and gave the first call of a hot trail. Rogers plunged that way with the other dogs all talking now. Then they were still, nosing into the thickets. Rogers turned to Culmer.

"What the hell? Listen ahead!"

On the silence came a lone dog's call. Long-drawn, weary and satisfied. Culmer cursed under his breath. Old Pelt had taken to the hills then, early and alone. That cry of his meant that he was closing in. Culmer had been busily scheming how to fool young Rogers and confuse the hounds, and now Pelt had made it impossible. Culmer would have to find Jim Lang and take him back before the boss could see little Steve and get the payoff. Culmer went on heavily to where Rogers was yelling at the edge of a slope that dropped a hundred feet. The dogs were milling about a thick clump of young spruce. Culmer searched with his eyes on the thicker, higher growth and called surlily:

"All right, you, Lang! I thought you'd know better. Come on."

"Run down," Rogers grinned. "The hounds circled and stopped. He's in there, Mr. Culmer."

"Yeah." Culmer moved on slowly and looked up at the first dry broken limbs below heavy green. "Hey, Lang. Come on down. You know them dogs won't hurt you. What made you think you could pull this? Smart guy, heh? Come on along. Cap'll want to talk to you." He shifted his rifle: "End of trail, Lang."

The green clump was moving. A voice called "Don't need no dogs. I'm comin'."

A thin shrill voice. A triumphant voice. Culmar started and peered harder. "The Kid!"

Steve Lang slid down the young pine to the ground. Rogers held the dogs in but their job was done and they were satisfied. Culmer snarled, "How come the dogs trailed you?"

"Well, what you think?" Steve pushed back his tousled hair from a dirty face and hitched up his pants. The manhunters could see now—and smell. The jail smell, the antiseptic stuff of the bunks against bugs; every prisoner carried the scent. Culmer grumbled on:

"Yeah, I see. Got your dad's clothes and shoes. Pretty smart, eh? Well, it won't get you nothin'."

"Go ahead. Arrest me fer somethin'. I dunno what, mebbe you do."

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Culmer eyed him narrowly, thinking just what he meant, for the chance to get that Lang mine washings might not be lost yet. The Kid limped on trying to hold up his dad's faded, stiff prison pants of dirty blue. "Well, you got me anyhow. But I ain't talkin'."

"You'll talk to a judge, for aidin' a prisoner to escape."

"I didn't aid anyone outa that wire. You can't prove I ever saw anybody since—since—"

Culmer broke in suddenly. He didn't want Steve to say they had talked yesterday. Or that Boykin had seen the Kid last night.

HE TURNED on the other man. "Take the dogs down, Rogers. If Cap's back to camp, say we've got the job in hand. Won't be long now."

"Where's Jim Lang? I don't figure this."

"I do. Them hounds won't take up another trail now they're at end of this run. Besides I figure it. Jim Lang's trail was good to the creek. Then he took to water, maybe half a mile by the way Nellie acted when she found it again and led on. But that's where his boy met him and they changed clothes. Then Jim took out for high country."

"Man, that's right, I guess!" Steve laughed excitedly.

"Sure, I'm right. Pretty fresh kid, ain't you now?"

The Kid was grinning defiance. Rogers had taken the pack down the ridge, and Culmer followed with Steve ahead of him. Culmer sneered:

"Over toward the big trees an' then the coast. Sure, I know."

"Mebbe so." The Kid hitched his heavy trousers and limped on. "A man could make a big start and cross plenty water, tule marsh an' creeks. But anyhow your dogs wouldn't trail him now, would they?"

He laughed again jubilantly. And then on the sunny silence came that long sad cry of a trailing hound. The Kid stopped abruptly. So did Culmer. Then he laughed and turned.

"Wouldn't trail, hey? What's that? Old Pelter, and the joke is now, that's because Jim Lang befriended the old worthless dog around the stockade. That's it. Pelt's stickin' by his pal."

And he laughed uproariously. Rogers turned down the hill, and the boss shouted at him: "Go on with them dogs! I'm bringin' this feller down. Want to ask him some things."

Steve went on slowly, and Culmer was close to his ear. "I get it. Your pa ain't left. He's goin' to hide out somewhere in the old Lang workin's. The trail lost he'd hang out a long time—waitin'."

Young Lang didn't answer. He felt it was no use. Culmer knew. With that old hound hanging around anybody could guess it.

Culmer suddenly became friendly. "Too bad, Kid. If I had my way—but you see how it is? I'm the Law. But mebbe I could help."

The Kid stopped, watched him quietly. A man has to trust somebody. He didn't see anyone else except this Law man now. He was getting scared about his gold, too, if what Boykin had said was true.

Culmer went on craftily. "Don't talk to anybody but me. I could telephone to Cap down at the sheriff's office, but listen—I won't."

"Give us a chance," the Kid blurted desperately. "With Dad out mebbe he could see a lawyer and make a fight to stay out."

"Oh, sure!" Culmer grinned. They were passing the ancient weedgrown ruble dump of the old mine. The little creek wandered around it, and above was the black hole of the mine all but hidden by brush. Culmer saw the boy glancing up at it uncertainly. Just below the tunnel mouth sat the old gray hound, the thin useless veteran of other grim manhunts. Culmer laughed and pointed.

"Yeah," muttered the Kid. "Say, Mr. Culmer, what you mean, I could—could talk to you about this?"

"Well, Steve, you got the stuff that talks, ain't you? You go figure it out yourself. I'm just about top man up here. Cap's too old an' easy, messin' in county politics an' all. I can handle this."

"I get what you mean. That stuff I panned all summer." He looked at his hard rough hands. "I did it for my dad. That's all it's for—well, if you can help, that's what it's for."

"We'll talk man to man now," grinned Culmer. "Sit down in the shade. Rogers'll say I'm bringin' you in but the trail's lost on Jim Lang. The boys down there'll think

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you're pretty smart. Even a judge wouldn't be too hard on you."

"Come on, let's sit down and talk," the Kid retorted. They talked ten minutes in the hot dusty silence of the dry hills. Then the Kid nodded and went on up to the tunnel's mouth. Old Pelter guarded it.

WHEN Culmer followed after a short wait the bleared eyes of the famed manhunter watched him patiently. Culmer looked about at the lost hopes of four generations of mining Langs. A dry-rotted rocker half buried in the sand of the watercourse that flowed from the tunnel. Around the dump below it was the scarred face of rock and dirt where some one of them had tried placer work. They had never interested capital in their dreams of hard rock working in their tunnels. The property had been worked out decades ago. Culmer looked into the hole.

"But that Kid had color. I seen it. He's got it somewhere."

He squatted in the shade of a pile of ancient props and roof beams and waited. But waiting was bad. He should be down at the camp at the telephone and organizing another hunt for Jim Lang. Then he went back in the tunnel until he saw it turn and slightly upward. A trickle of water came past his feet. Somewhere he heard a drip. He loosened the small flashlight always carried with his automatic and went into the half dark. Looking back he saw the shadow of the old dog on the rock floor just inside the tunnel mouth. He went about the turn where it was completely dark and listened. Then grumbled:

"Hey, Kid, you been gone a long time. Where's the stuff? Where you at?"

No answer. He waited again and then felt along the rough wall and stood with his flash picking out the floor ahead. There was more water here, shallow pools; and then he saw a dripping wooden bulkhead apparently across a side drift. It seemed to be the head of the little stream outside where the Kid had panned his little nuggets and free gold.

Culmer went on grumbling when he struck his head on a low timber. He felt as though he was a mile underground. He felt along the wet wooden wall, and then a quiet voice spoke from somewhere beyond.

"You better go back, man. It's tricky beyond this."

"Hey? You? Jim Lang? Where's Steve gone?"

"Never mind my boy. I'm talking."

"The hell you are! To me? Listen—I can take you back; and make it mean for you. You still got time to serve."

"I know." The quiet voice of an unseen man went on: "Some things about this I don't understand. My own son hasn't told me all. He's taken the wrong slant."

"I'll say he has." Culmer roved his light around but saw nothing except the rough-hewn walls, the wet boarding and the trickle of water past his feet. He stepped forward surily. "And just what has he told you? Listen, Lang—mebbe you can still walk out of this."

The unseen man laughed dryly; then coughed. Culmer caught at that.

"That rock dust you work in is pretty bad for you, ain't it? The Kid knows that too. Let's have an understanding."

"Well, say it. You don't need to talk to Steve."

"All right. I'll talk plain enough. You got money—gold. I seen it. Is that plain enough talk?"

"You get out of here. It's my property. When you get out I'll walk out of my mine and go down and give myself up to Captain Anstey. Is that plain enough to you?"

"Yeh? Mebbe I could drag you out, make it look bad. Resistin' an officer. A lot of things can look bad. I don't like your damn talk, Lang."

"Get out. You don't need to hear it. I know what to do to square things. For the boy and myself. Go back, take up my time again."

"And talk? Make me look bad, show me up? That it?"

"I'll tell all I know. So'll my boy."

"Yeah? Mebbe you won't." Culmer stepped nearer trying to see past the wooden wall. The voice seemed to be there. Then something brushed his knee. He whirled the light down. The hound had followed him and went ahead and turned to look back. Culmer howled and kicked at him. The hound went on, so gray against the rock, a man could hardly see him. Culmer jerked his gun out and down, yelling his rage.

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"Don't shoot that dog. I was his friend down there—Cap Anstey and me. He followed me last night."

"Yeah, trailed you down, you mean. Gave me the first lead you were here. All right, come out, Lang, I'm takin' you out."

CULMER went on trying to see Jim Lang. Around the corner of the bulkhead timbers. Then he did see something moving just out of the light. Either man or dog. Well, he didn't want the dog now. Lang's voice had been too cold, merciless to him. If he did any talking maybe old Arizona days might come out later. Culmer couldn't have that. He was pretty cold himself now, and cunning. He'd fix Lang so he couldn't talk. An escaped prisoner resisting arrest. An officer could get by with that. No witnesses—easy as this. He saw something move along the wet boarding. Water dripped from the wall above it, gleamed in his light.

"Well, you asked for it!" He raised the gun and fired. The shadow moved along the boards he thought and he fired again. Swung and pulled. Every cartridge was shot into the bulkhead. Water flew and then spurted.

He heard Lang shout, seeming farther away. But Culmer was staring at a splintered segment of rotten wood. It was breaking forward. A little cascade of water, then a straight spurt, and then an exploding torrent. Culmer held his light on it an instant, then turned and ran into the darkness behind him. A heavy roaring followed him, then he felt water to his knees, his waist, rising swiftly. He dropped gun and flashlight when the tearing stream struck his neck. A man had to throw out his arms or his brains would be battered upon the rock walls which Langs had beaten out with pick and powder years ago. The tunnel filled, then vomited a dirty flood out down the hillside into the sun. It raised dust from the dry banks when it rose on the dump and then on again towards the canyon creekbed. Steve Lang heard it first and then he jumped up from the sandbar when he saw water roaring from the tunnel.

Then he saw his dad coming out from the upper entry above the flood where Steve himself had emerged. The stream was lessening now. Steve saw the black mouth of the tunnel and the choke of rotten beams and planks breaking out below it. Steve waded that way and stared among the boulders. A man's muddy elbow stuck out.

"Culmer! Hey, dad, come over here quick!"

Jim Lang climbed down the slope and looked quietly. "That's right. I told him not to go near that bulkhead. But rotten as it was he kept shooting into it—after me, son. That side drift has held water back for sixty years I guess. It was bound to break, son."

Steve was turning Culmer's head, the face mashed with rotted wood and rock. "It killed him, knockin' him around. Culmer, he—he—"

"I understand, son. Tried to stick us up. When I refused he knew he better kill me or I'd talk. So would you. You did wrong, son."

"I wanted you out—have a chance to clear your shootin' case—"

"I know. Come on, we'll talk to Cap Anstey—he's a fair man. I'll go finish my time, ten months more. Steve you can take me in—maybe get a reward for capturing an escaped prisoner!" Jim Lang began laughing as he hadn't since the judge sentenced him. Steve pointed at the side of the tunnel. There sat old Pelter watching them patiently. Steve turned to his dad: "Say, you know what? That hound didn't follow my trail—he knew where you were. I'll go tell Cap Anstey his wonder dog was loyal to him after all—even if he hated to turn you up. And say, that hound led Culmer to his death doing it. Dad, you say you'll go serve your time out? Why I got near a thousand dollars' worth of dust hid out! What we do with it now?"

"It'll take you out of the mountains to school a year."

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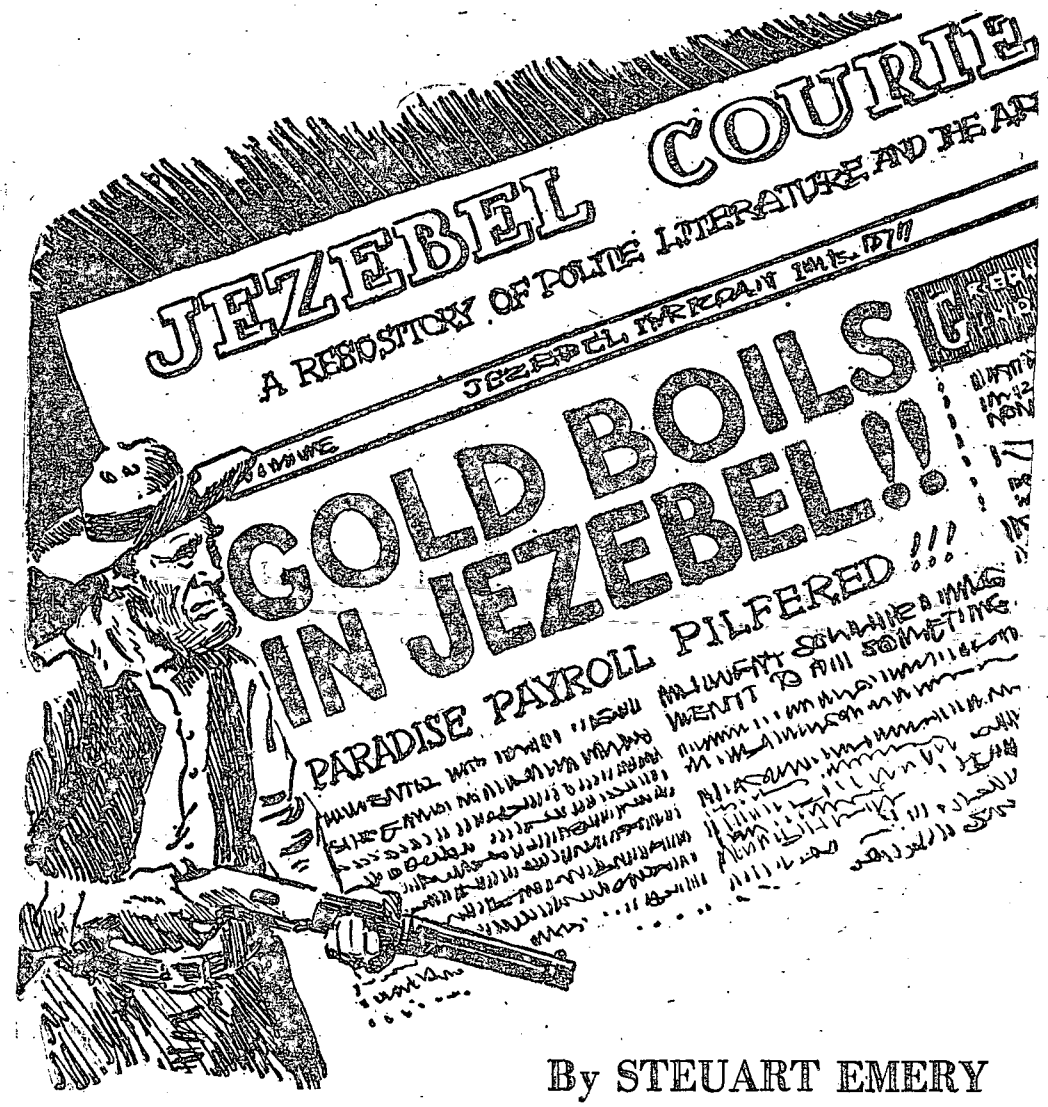

By STEUART EMERY

I

THE eyes of Union Jones, tramp printer extraordinary of the Jezebel *Courier,* blinked open viewing the ceiling of his second-floor rear chamber in Madame Santa Fé's select boarding and rooming house. They were glazed eyes; Union Jones' chest heaved under the blanket from the bottom of which his copper-toed boots protruded, his grizzled beard was a wreck and his bald, desert-tanned cranium bore the bruise of an encounter with some angry stairstep or awning stanchion. The full flood of Arizona's blazing sunshine poured through the window and he closed his eyes in anguish against it.

"Hung over agin!" he groaned. "Oh, death, where is thy sting?"

The sudden sound reverberated, the explosion of it went off in his brain. A clear high call sounded beyond the door.

"Senor Jones!"

"Duck, boys, duck! Cannon fire an' the rebel yell!" howled Union. "It's Pickett's charge a-comin'." He flung the blanket over his head and huddled under it.

"Senor Jones!" again came the call. "You are awake, revered Senor Jones?" The doorknob turned and Plutarco Herrera, fifteen-year-old printer's devil and apprentice entered. On his handsome, precocious face

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Union Jones Was Strictly Honest—When He Was Bribed, He Stayed Bribed, by Gorrymighty!

was a bright smile. "Behold, my more than father, you ordair me to arouse you here at the crack of noon."

Union Jones' head popped out. His bulging eyes receded and he blew out his blazing red cheeks in relief: "So it be nuthin' but you, Pluto, I was hearin' strange things."

"We have the old saying in Mexico, venerable Senor Jones: 'To him who has overpartaken of the tequila the scamper of a mouse is like the thunder of the longhorn stampede.' I did but knock and call mos' softly. You have had the hard night, *si?*"

"Do not ask me no questions, Pluto, I kin not answer 'em. As a matter o' sheer fact I don't seem to remember nuthin' at all o' last night, after midnight, which means it must o' been tremendous."

Pluto unrolled a sheet of newsprint and held it out. "The front page proof of the papair, Senor Jones, wheech you bade me bring to you aftair I had feenish setting the

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type on the bullion story. Look you, there ees still the hole een eet to be filled."

UNION tossed away the blanket, revealing himself fully clothed in ink-stained flannel shirt and jeans. "I would appear ter have had the forethought of a volunteer fireman," he observed. "I am prepared ter go ter work immediate. That hole?" He furrowed his forehead, and stared at the quarter column gap in the type. "We can plug that easy with a boiler-plate Kidney Kureall ad if nuthin' comes up between now an' goin' ter press. Gaw knows this be the dullest week in the history o' Jezebel. Exactly zero has occurred so far. Outside o' the bullion hoard there ain't a line o' news."

"Perhance the news eet ees headed this way," remarked Pluto. He produced a sheet of yellow flimsy covered with carbon handwriting. "The friendly Senor Speed Murphy of the telegraph sent thees to the *Courier* by the hand of his messengair weeth word that perhaps you could use eet in the paper. Eet ees the copy of the wire dispatch which just came ovair the poles from Paradise for Sheriff Lew from the Paradise sheriff."

"Huh?" gagged Union and snatched the flimsy. He began to read the message aloud.

> Paradise express office robbed early last night of $4,000 payroll by two men answering descriptions of Dirk Candee and Puma Morales, partners of white buckskin suited Gentleman George Gaunt, brainy bank robber and payroll pillager who made Colorado too hot to hold him. They got away in gun battle, small Paradise posse chased and lost them. Gentleman George nowhere in sight. Watch out for Candee and Puma, you have official circular descriptions of Gentleman George and his gang in your office.
>
> SHERIFF PARADISE

"A bright item at last," triumphed Union. "Take it back ter the office an' stick it on the spindle. Then git up ter Sheriff Lew's an' copy off his descriptions o' the fugitives an' bring it ter me at the Arizony Palace. In the meantime, I shall git busy on the headlines. Gimme the copy paper an' pencil off my bureau."

Union dashed off the lines and recited them.

PARADISE PAYROLL PILFERED
Paltry Posse Pursues Plunderers

"Chatty an' alliterative, Pluto. Any kind of a robbery which happens ter Paradise or some other place be a funny incident; when it happens in Jezebel, it be a civic calamity callin' fer decisive action an' burnin' editorials. It all depends who it be which slips an' whose bottom hits the cactus plant. It be high time we had a good crime in Jezebel. Preferably with shootin'."

He thrust out a copper-toed boot, sitting on the edge of the bed, and it clanged on a bulky object. The china slop jar was of a green background with large red roses painted on it, the cover was of a mismatched white.

"Now, why be it there instead o' by the washstand?" inquired Union. "Was I figgerin' on the *mal de mer* an' a sea voyage?" Mechanically he lifted the lid, his grizzled beard bristled in horror, his voice rose in a shriek. "Good gorry-mighty, Pluto, we have got our crime an' I done it!"

He plunged his hands into the depths of the dry container and strewed what they brought out on the bed. Gold watch chains and heavy jobs gleamed, a pair of ornate earrings shone, a diamond ring glistened, several lucky nuggets were there. A double handful of gleaming gold lay on the rough woolen blanket.

"I have robbed a jewelry store in my sleep!" howled Union. "I be an alcholic acrobat, no, a sommnabulist. Lock the door, search everybody in the room!" Wildly he plunged his hands through his pockets, turning them inside out. There was absolutely nothing in them. "Filled with the fresh air of Arizony," he groaned. "I have got what Horace Greeley, whose best printer I was on the New York *Tribune,* told me I would come down with some day—a subconscious criminal mentality—after that time he found me helpin' myself to one o' his cigars outer his rolltop desk. Pluto, go call a doc, call Doc Rhubarb Johnson over ter his drugstore, call Doc Mac Carty—call——"

"Here I am, Union Jones, my friend," stated a voice of strong educated timber. A six-foot stranger in a quiet, expensive broadcloth suit with an impeccable boiled shirt and collar with neatly tied string tie loomed in the door. His hair and eyebrows were a

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glossy, profuse coal-black, his strong chin beautifully shaven. In his hand he carried a square leather case. "I am Gladwell Barker, the old Missouri Sunshine Dispenser. I know what you need, I shall prescribe."

HE FLUNG back the top of the case. It was filled with small sample bottles. From the top of one he withdrew its small cork. Expertly he snatched the tooth mug off the washstand and poured the sample in. "Drink it, Union."

The most appetizing aroma Union had sniffed in years tingled in his nostrils. He gulped, he gulped again. "You be rightly named Gladwell Barker. You have made me feel both glad and well. What be this life-givin' liquid sunshine you dispense?"

"It is a sample of Paul Revere Rye, our very best. The bottle carries a picture of Paul Revere on his famous ride."

"So did I come from the Commonwealth o' Massachusetts," gurgled Union. "Arrgh . . . warrgh . . . ooof . . . delicious! On a shot o' this I can picture Paul gallopin' through Middlesex with not only the sparks shootin' out behind his hoss's hoofs but outer Paul's mouth."

"Try this, Union," said Barker, decanting another sample. "It is known as our Pony Express Bourbon."

Union tilted the mug and its contents vanished in his beard. "Holy Gloucester mackerel fleet! Paul Revere's ride has dwindled to nuthin'. On this you can gallop the mails clear from St. Joe, Missouri, ter Sacramento, Californiay, without a local stop. You be the greatest doctor in Americy."

"Not a doctor, Union," smiled the newcomer. "Head salesman for the Old Missouri Sunshine Distilling Company."

"You be a redeye drummer? You do not look like one."

"Because I wear sober clothes and not a purple-and-white checked coat, a red flannel vest and a white hat and tell the story about the salesman and the farmer's daughter ten times a day? The Old Missouri Sunshine Distilling Company sells its wares through more dignified agents, Union. I prepared for the law, but found a salesman's pursuit more to my nature. I am quite human, I like to drink and gamble. So now——"

He produced a roll of bills and stripped a fifty-dollar note off it. He laid it on the bed and picked up the diamond ring from among the assortment on the bed.

"There you are, Union, before half past twelve. I am redeeming the ring I gave you as security for that bet you won. If the owners of the other pieces—" he gestured toward the assortment on the bed—"do not show up in the next few minutes, they are yours by right of the agreement on which you advanced them credit as banker of the poker game and sole winner."

"Banker—poker game—sole winner?" ejaculated Union brokenly. "I won these in in a poker game?"

"In the back room of the Arizona Palace. Your luck, I might say, was miraculous. Three and four card draws which produced four of a kind, two cards to an inside straight, a three card draw to the deuce and trey of hearts that produced a straight flush over my four aces. That was when you credited me with fifty dollars on this ring. As I told you, I had left my main cash stake in the Grand Hotel safe. The other jewelry you had picked up as we went along, you having won the entire six hundred dollars cash that was in the game."

"I won six hundred bucks!" howled Union. "Where be it?"

"You stopped at the bar and asked for it to be locked up in the Palace safe."

"Ah!" chortled Union. "That was most smart o' me. All I got to do be saunter down the street an' take it out."

"No, Union. Never have I seen so many creditors swarm upon a single individual at one time, all brandishing IOU's. They fairly leaped from all corners of the place. They took away your six hundred dollar winnings and tore up the IOU's. Five of them were left with $100 of your paper which you promised to take up within twenty-four hours. However, besides my fifty-dollar bill, you now have the jewelry pledges." He consulted an elegant heavy gold watch. "Twelve twenty-nine. In one minute they are yours."

"Who was the lady sittin' in the game with the gold earrings?" demanded Union. "I do not like ter take gold earrings off ladies."

"It was a Mexican rancher who like all of us ran out of cash. You gave him fifty dollars credit on them and overtook his pat ace full with four deuces, on a four card draw to a lone king. Another miracle."

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"An' then what occurred?"

"Plenty. The Mexican burst into terrific curses and leaped for his gunbelt hanging on the wall peg behind him, swearing to have your life."

"Which apparently he did not get," observed Union. "I still be here all in one piece, although that piece does not feel so good. I do not remember nuthin' about the fracas or in fact, anythin' about anythin' after twelve. Did he shoot at me?"

"A big man called Deputy Pete who was standing watching the game and drinking a glass of beer reached for the peg and got the gunbelt before the Mex. He told him he'd impound it in the sheriff's office until the Mex was ready to leave town. The Mex left the room and saloon still swearing vengeance."

"Which I am here for," growled a Latin voice. In the doorway stood a short, bow-legged Mexican with piercing black eyes and a powder-burned ear. He looked menacing, powerful, reckless. He slapped a hand on the butt of his revolver and lurched forward, baring his teeth. "The earrings, you geeve back. Or else——"

The aroma of tequila filled the room. This was a Latino seething with rage and cactus brandy. The next scent in the room would be that of powder smoke. Gladwell Barker dropped his hand to the sample case on the floor and lifted up its tray. His fist went in under it and the bore of a Navy Colt, whisked from nowhere leveled on the intruder. His eyes were glacial.

"Senor, drop that gun!"

The Mexican shrugged, the lids dropped over his eyes, his hand fell to his side. "I, Rafael Vegas, come to redeem my earreengs." He pulled a fifty-dollar bill from his vest pocket, tossed it rudely on the bed. "I take, *si?* I go?"

The cold sweat subsided on Union's forehead and he nodded. Vegas scooped up the earrings.

"I have made the good business deal on my cattle. I would like my revenge, Senor Jones, but I leave town witheen the hour. Perchance in the future we meet again."

He stalked from the room. Union's brow corrugated with thought. "That pertickler Mex impresses me as a killer which enjoys same. You sure stopped him cold fer which I thank you in the name o' the entire Jones fambly o' Massachusetts. You be a fast man wth a six fer a redeye drummer, an' how you do conceal yore fireiron."

"On the frontier one must be prepared for self-defense, Union," said Barker. "I do not care for gunbelts and to pack a Navy Colt in the pocket is unwieldy. I am ready to fight should I ever have to."

Union stared at the revolver in Barker's hand. He saw the notches on the side of its barrel, six of them. "Half a dozen men you got so far, Sunshine Dispenser. Yore chisel says so."

Gladwell Barker's lips clamped. "This gun I bought from a pawnshop in St. Louis. The notches were in it already."

The weapon whisked out of sight as fast as it had appeared. The sample tray of bottles went back into the case. "And now shall we repair to the Arizona Palace? I am trying to interest the bartender in our Old Missouri Sunshine line and I shall be glad to purchase for you, since you appear to be denuded of cash funds. The hundred you now have is owed on your paper."

"It be close ter one o'clock, ain't it?" demanded Union. "I be denuded o' no funds, since the joolery pledges ain't been redeemed. These gold chains and etcetery I shall take down ter Blacksmith Ben Bones, the ingenious Maine lobster, which will smelt them down in his forge. I shall then proceed across the street from his blacksmith shop ter the bank, the president o' which happens ter be outer town. But the flint-hearted cashier, Dewberry Beanpole Stebbins, can give me the cash per ounce an' add the Jones ingot ter the collection o' ingots which be already bustin' the bank's seams."

"Ingots? In the bank?"

"All there in the front page o' the paper which comes out tonight. The Paradise gold mine has been sendin' its pre-Cambrian, near free gold ore ter the Jezebel smelter havin' none of its own an' bingo it goes inter the bank, in ten pound pigs. Look at the paper."

Sunshine Dispenser Barker looked. His face went suddenly masklike. "This hole with no print in it?"

"Plugged with the news Gentleman George Gaunt, the brainy white suit bandit, an' his gang pilfered a Paradise payroll. I shall add their descriptions from Sheriff

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Lew's files an'—" Inspiration burst in Union's eyes. "News at last! It ain't happened yet, but it might. I shall remake the front page an give it a big headline. 'Gentleman George and Gang Galloping for Jezebel.' A good scare sells papers. Be interestin', be enterprisin' at all costs, includin' that o' the truth be the secret o' success in the newspaper business. We are off, Sunshine Dispenser!"

II

"LUNCHEON," remarked Ben Bones, Jezebel's barrel-chested, rafter-shouldered blacksmith, "air a right heartenin' thing. It refreshes the stummick an' the soul at one an' the same time. The greatest gift of the Good Providence to the honest workin' man air the noon whistle."

Atop the anvil close to the low-banked forge a copy of last week's Jezebel *Courier* was spread and on it reposed an array of cold beef, sliced bread, pickles and an opened can of sardines. Over the forge fire on an iron plate simmered away a saucepan of beans and a pot of coffee. "Well, Union, what do you an' your neighbor want? You crave I should fry you up a coupla aigs on my hearth fire? Everythin' from blacksmithin' to beans bakin' did by old Ben Bones of Bangor, Maine."

"Fry us up aigs?" inquired Union. He and Gladwell Barker had just entered the smithy, located opposite the plaza of the red-brick Bank of Jezebel. "Boil us down some gents' jewelry fer lunch. Where do these go ter be smelted?"

"Keep 'em out of the bean pot," ordered Ben Bones. "I shall smelt your handful of gold when I go back across the street. I have jest knocked off workin' in the bank strong room with my portable forge, cuttin' out the sheet-iron door an' grillin' it an' makin' barred apertures in the rear an' roof for ventilation.

"It was the safe deposit boxes done it, what with citizens keepin' their legal an' privit papers an' stocks in 'em and comin' in ter look 'em over an' howlin' they was broilin' on a Gehenna gridiron what with the heat in the place. From now on they will count their assets an' read their documents in a more coolish atmosphere while sittin' next the biggest pile of gold ingots west of the Mississippi. I am doin' the last of my chore, the strong room door which I have took off an' gotta get back by nightfall. If any bandit should hear the door was off—"

"Banks bring bullets, like I have often said before," remarked Union. "Gold an'—woof!"

He shuddered and turned his head. A warm, moist breath had blown upon the back of his neck from the mouth of the horse that had been ridden soundlessly in behind him and reined up.

"Nuthin' but a hoss. An' who be you, stranger, creepin' up on an honest citizen an' neighin' on his nape?"

The rider was tall and rangy and he sat his mount like a part of it. Lead had torn through his Stetson only recently to judge by the rawness of the hole, not dusty yet, but the scar fissure that ran over the left temple had been administered years ago. It was as dry and hard as the flinty features that ran into a wedge-shaped chin. The man's eyes were agate-cold, not only two ivory-handled guns swung from his shell-packed belt, but a third nested in an armpit holster. The horse's head drooped, its flanks heaved, it looked foundered.

"Shoein' job, blacksmith," said the rider. "A pronto job." He swung from the saddle. "Right fore-foot, left hind foot."

"I'll look at it," said Ben Bones and came forward. He lifted the feet one after the other. Both shoes were gone, the hooves were cut cruelly. "You ain't gointer to get no pronto job, mister. Right now I air workin' fer the bank when I ain't eatin'. You have about wrecked this hoss of yourn ridin' him on rock."

The newcomer's agate-cold eyes glared. "I was chased by Injuns comin' up out o' Mexico. Any other blacksmith in town?"

"They's one of sorts down Mexican Alley, next to Greasy Tamale."

"Then you can go to hell!" snarled the rider. He swung into saddle and walked his horse out of the shop. In the street he jammed rowels and the crippled mount went into painful speed.

"Nice stranger," observed Union. "Jest the polite, big-hearted type we wish fer citizens. I be just as pleased ter see the last o' him. There he goes an'—good gorry-mighty, he has ridden down Pluto!"

A wild screeching in mixed Spanish and

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English arose, oaths broke from the rider. Pluto, knocked down, had gotten up from the sand with the nearest stone in his fist. It whizzed and took the scarred man in the chest. His mouth twisted, venomously, and he ripped the quirt from his saddle, crowding his horse onto Pluto. His hand came up, the quirt poised.

"You blasted little greaser!"

The blow flashed down, Pluto dodged, but the rider followed him up with his horse.

"Weapon!" howled Union. "Weapon, Ben Bones! Pluto, I be comin'!"

WILDLY he glanced around, grabbed the tongs and ripped a red-hot coal from the forge fire. He went lumbering at top speed onto the street and into the melee where Pluto dodged and the scarred rider struck at him again and again. As expertly as though he were rounding up a steer the rider drove Pluto backward and penned him in the doorway of a store, pressing his horse up onto the boardwalk. Now the quirt came back for a lash that would not miss.

"Got yuh, little greaser!"

Pluto let out a high-pitched yell, the rider let out one that was pitched lower with the sear of pain in it. Plunging onto the boards Union had jammed the red-hot coal into the knuckles of his hand as it came up from below for a body lash. The dropped quirt hit wood, the rider jerked upright.

"Get goin'," said Union shortly. "Get goin' ter Mexican Alley an' the buckets o' blood where you belong. Reach fer one o' yore guns an' you get an eye out with this nice little cinder."

He held the tongs with the blazing ember in a threatening position. One touch of the fiery coal and agony would strike. Ben Bones walked out of the blacksmith shop. He had a Winchester and it was leveled at the scarred stranger.

"Foller the advice of Union Jones who air somewhat of a New England sage," he said. "The State of Maine will always back up the Republican ticket an' a feller New Englander. Run along, neighbor."

"Blast yuh!" rasped the stranger at Union. "I'll git yuh yet." He swung his horse around and went off at a shambling lope. Union rubbed a hand across his sweating forehead.

"Well, Pluto?" he inquired. "How come?"

"Behold, Senor Jones, my-more-than-father, I was but running down the street, not looking where I was going when this rider ran into me. It was at the Arizona Palace one told me he had seen you headed into the smithy of Senor Bones so I hasted here bearing the descriptions from the office of the sheriff."

He held out a circular and Union unfolded it, back in the blacksmith shop to which the group had retired. His eyes blinked and goggled, the printed type was small and it was badly smudged.

"Allow me to read it for you, Union, my friend," said Gladwell Barker. He picked the paper out of Union's hand. "Between the libations of last night and the brilliant sunshine of the morning the best of eyesight is prone to fail." He stepped back a pace or two. "Here we are. Full descriptions of Gentleman George and his gang. Starting with Gentleman George. . . . Tall build . . . flaming red hair, also flaming red mustache. . . . Ouch!" The cry of pain broke from him.

"Lo, the senor's pants are afire!" yelled Pluto. "His bottom blazes! The water, queeck!"

He rushed for the bucket. Barker writhed in pain, smoke and sparks bursting from the skirts of his coat, backed up against the forge. His hand that held the paper went rearward and down, beating at the fire, the circular fluttered into the forge and went up in a wisp of smoke. Then Pluto's pail of water struck and the clothing conflagration was over.

"Sheer carelessness," said Barker. "I am sorry, Union. I had to let go of the descriptions in order to save myself."

Union's forehead contracted. "That be quite all right, Sunshine Dispenser. Pluto, he can scamper back ter the sheriff's office fer another copy."

"Eet ees the only copy, the Deputy Pete said," remarked Pluto.

"Get Sheriff Lew ter give you the copy's contents from memory."

"The invincible Sheriff Lew is out pursuing the rustlers. And, behold his deputy, Pete, who geeve eet to me told me he hadn't even read it yet. Eet ees disaster."

"Union, my friend," said Barker, "I can-

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not apologize too deeply. I have deprived you of your week's sensational story."

"Not with my prodigious newspaperman's instinct workin', you ain't," snorted Union. "The only copy o' things be always gettin' lost around a newspaper shop but somehow it gets itself reproduced. You see that buildin' right across the street, next the bank plaza? That be the Transcontinental Telegraph. Watch an' also lissen." He strode to the street and bellowed. "Hi, Speed Murphy, rush telegram!"

On the porch of the Transcontinental appeared Speed Murphy, the gaunt, stoop-shouldered key artist.

"What are you yowlin' about, Union?"

"Get off a rush wire ter Paradise sheriff, ask him fer descriptions o' Gentleman George Gaunt, an' gang fer the *Courier*. I will pay him newspaper space rates. Locate me when you get it."

"Okay, Union," called Speed. "You stay sober enough to read it."

"So there we be!" exulted Union. "We go right forward with our honestly manufactured sensation so soon as them word pictures come in over the wire. I be gonna improve the news story from 'Gentleman George and Gang Gallopin' fer Jezebel' ter 'Gentleman George and Gang in Jezebel ter Loot Bank.' So then what occurs? Five minutes after the *Courier* hits the saloons tonight the whole town will be lookin' fer individuals answerin' the descriptions, informin' on unlucky total strangers, turnin' in their wives newly arrived, free-boardin' cousins from Ioway they don't like an' a merry evenin' of hell will pop. Personally, I figger Gentleman George an' his gang after knockin' over the Paradise payroll be in Mexico by now, but it be my business ter sell newspapers, rather than peddle dull facts. We ain't gointer need no Kidney Kureall ad ter plug that hole on page one, like I said."

"Union, my friend, I have sadly upset your work," stated Barker. "I too am a businessman. Do you yourself profit personally from the advertising?"

"Fifty percentum on what I bring in. Some weeks I get an imposin' sum but it never seems ter stick in my pants."

"I shall insert a $500 advertisement for Old Missouri Sunshine Products in your paper, if you can hold over publication until tomorrow. I must have wired confirmation from St. Louis. I have hurt you, Union, this will be a small reparation in the sum of $250 for yourself."

Union's eyes started from his head.

"Is it a deal?"

"A deal it be," gurgled Union. "The entire Jones ancestors o' the Commonwealth o' Massachusetts would shudder in their graves was I ter turn down such an opportunity. There has been plenty of occasions on which I have held over the *Courier* fer somethin' hot, an' this be hot. Yes, sir, Sunshine Dispenser Barker, it be a deal."

"Deal?" grinned Ben Bones. "Union, you bin bribed. Mister Barker, you need not have a fear. Union Jones air strickly honest, when he air bribed he stays bribed. His word air as good as his bond, providin' it was not given at the Arizony Palace Saloon where he air prone not to remember what in tarnation it was. Union, come along over to the bank and I shall smelt down your jewelry there. Me, I shall top off my munchin' of luncheon with these Pride of Maine sardines, no finer in the world, on the way."

"And I shall join you there shortly," said Barker. "I have a business solicitation to make at the Mesa Saloon and after that the wire to send. Wait for me in the bank strongroom, Union, and I shall hand you a $100 retainer on the advertisement."

HE STRODE off, whiskey sample case dangling in his hand and Union and Ben Bones crossed the street, traversed the bank plaza and entered the plate-glassed, brick-walled structure. Ben Bones led the way past the outer office where Dewberry "Beanpole" Stebbins, the unduly elongated and tow-haired cashier, presided, through the luxurious president's office and past the gaping door into the sheet-iron strongroom where the portable forge glowed. On trestles lay the metal door with its upper center cut out and half of its grille bars already set in place. In the rear brick wall square holes loomed, high up, they had strong bars in them now. Half a dozen barred squares were cut in the ceiling.

"Here you go, Union," said Ben Bones, and tossed the watch chains and miscellaneous gold furbishings into a small crucible. "I shall jest set it on the fire and let her drip into a mold. Gold melts together

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mighty quick but it does not lose no value." He wiped the last of the sardine oil off his chin. "And now to git back to work on finishin' this door by nightfall. Lookit that stuff over there."

Union looked at the bars of solid gold piled on a wooden table against the rear wall. They were there, all right, the sacks to carry them laid next to them and a Winchester on top.

"All I got to do now air stoke up the portable an' red-hot the rivets in the bucket," observed Ben Bones. "Then whang 'em inter place in the grille bars an' let 'em set, after which the door goes back on its hinges. An' the ingots an' the bank's cash air as snug as a bug in a rug again. Jest another job of blacksmithin'."

"You do not think I ain't seen plenty, you ingenious Maine lobster?" asked Union. "The blacksmith shop be the warmest place in a New England town in winter. The young tadpoles after school an' the old folks are always hangin' around it, the latter spittin' tobaccer inter the forge fire ter hear it sizzle an' the former hopin' ter learn how ter by watchin' their elders. But get goin', Jezebel ain't no town ter have its bank vault door off when gold means gunfire."

"'Twon't take long, you old goat," grinned Bones. "You ole . . ." He passed his hand across his forehead, it was dripping wet. "Why . . . why . . . you air an old goat with two heads—three heads . . . my—my. . . ." He swayed on his feet and gripped his midriff with both hands. "I gotta volcano eruptin' inside me! Ah, wooo!"

A greenish pallor sprang out onto his face, his eyes went utterly lack-lustre, he began to sway on his feet.

"Union!" he gasped feebly. "I air took!" Then he went to the floor in a dead faint, his brawny body limp.

"Good gorry mighty!" ejaculated Union. "He be out as cold as Kennebec salmon salad an' not from likker nor heat. He has et somethin', it was them Maine sardines which the can was left in the sun. They be nuthin' more deadly than a canned Maine sardine gone wrong. Beanpole Stebbins!" His howl traveled the entire bank premises. "Yell fer Doc Mac McCarty an' his stummick pump! Put it on the air Ben Bones has been stricken with Maine sardines! I be gettin' him home."

He wrenched up the blacksmith and slung him over his sturdy shoulder in the fireman's haul. He got him out of the bank and shouldered with him across the plaza onto the street, still yelling. From here and there, from the nearest to catch his cry to the farthest to take it up the old familiar shout traveled the length of Silver Street.

"Doc McCarty, git Doc Mac!"

"Ben Bones is stricken!"

"Ben Bones air dyin' o' Maine sardines!"

Union lurched into the blacksmith shop and into its rear annex where he laid Ben Bones down on his bunk, and stripped him of his apron. He went back to the boardwalk to wait for the result of Jezebel's turbulent alarm.

Far up Silver Street appeared the light spring wagon, its townsman driver lashing, with the heavy-shouldered figure of Doc Mac McCarty of the burnsides, seated beside him. The dust trailed out behind its wheels, more tumultuous yelling accompanied its rush.

"H'ya comes the stummick pump! Now Ben will gush!"

The sweating townsman pulled up in front of the smithy and Doc Mac McCarty swung out with a brisk air.

"Well, Union? I climbed aboard the first rig."

"Pore Ben Bones he has been ter the sardine factory once too often; which he buys 'em by the case an' I think he left this last luncheon an' munchin' can out in the sun. Gush him, quick, Doc. He has turned from green in the face ter the silvery pallor o' the sardine which poisoned him."

"Okay, Union. You and you—" Doc Mac jabbed a finger at a pair of competent-looking citizens in the swelling crowd—"you come in with me. The rest of you loafers run along."

"You ain't gonna let us watch Ben gush?" complained a spectator.

"Not at under a dollar a head, all funds collected to go to the mission. Because I took out Swamper Slewfoot Lum's rupturing appendix on the Arizona Palace billiard table doesn't mean you get a free show every time I make an emergency call."

He went into the rear of the building and Union shrugged.

"I have got a slight operation o' my own ter perform," he muttered. "I gotta bilin'

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o' gold across the way which must be attended ter."

He pressed through the crowd and made his way back into the bank. Its front premises were filled now with a mass of citizens pushing checks under the window of Cashier Dewberry Beanpole Stebbins. The regular rush of Saturday afternoon customers drawing their Saturday night spending money was on. He passed through the president's private office and into the strongroom behind it. It was savagely hot with the forge fire going and the perspiration began to cascade off his forehead. Drawing out a bandanna he mopped, gazing at the small crucible on the glowing coals. Already a trickle of gleaming gold was running from its bottom into the mold, the watch chains, fobs, and other jewelry were becoming molten metal.

"A bilin' o' gold be as simple as a bilin' o' tea," remarked Union aloud. "Except what you do not add sugar an' milk or lemon. As fer this auriferous hoard over here—" He turned and surveyed the piled ingots. They seemed to glow with a dull fire and he began to sweat even worse. "Great godfrey mighty, I be commencin' ter feel an itch in my fingertips an' my jeans have prodigiously big pockits! It would be nuthin' but the act of a second fer a smart member o' the Jones fambly ter load up an'——"

His sturdy frame shuddered. He lumbered to the table and spread the sacks rapidly, one after the other, over the shining pile. "Get outer sight, you! Union Jones, you be havin' the thoughts of Gentleman George!"

"Five hundred dollars, Jones!"

"Huh?" Union whirled, agape. Gladwell Barker, the Sunshine Dispenser was standing directly behind him and he was holding out five crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. "How in heck did you get in here?"

"I merely waved these in front of the guard and told him I wished to pay them to you in here, where I knew you would be. I have decided not to wire St. Louis for confirmation of the advertisement but to take its payment on myself as head road salesman. Here you are, Union."

"Saved!" gurgled Union. "Saved from a terrible temptation by a better one. Saved by an honest bribe!"

"Yes, Jones, five hundred dollars!"

Barker held out his hand and Union's hand rose gropingly. Then it drew back. His blazing red face twisted with emotion.

"No, I—I——"

"Five hundred dollars, Jones!" intoned Sunshine Dispenser Gladwell Barker as though the words were a magic spell. His face wore a concentrated expression, his eyes fixed those of Union almost in the manner of a hypnotist.

"I have changed my——"

For the second time that day the cannon shot reverberated in the eardrums of Union Jones. But this time it was not a knock on a door, transformed and magnified by his nerves. It was a real gun shot that echoed in the metal-lined chamber with the force of artillery. Union was down, scrambling on hands and knees for the rear wall, an eartip stinging. Black powder smoke roiled in the small vault, it swept away and the hand was revealed jutting through the barred aperture. It held a Colt and under the trigger guard a flash of white showed. The flash of white disappeared as the six-gun belched again and its bullet clanged into iron, missing Union by a hair's breadth. Sunshine Dispenser Barker stood stiffly in the center of the vault, the hundred-dollar bills clutched in his hand.

"Murder!" howled Union. "The gold has brought bullets!"

The gunhand swiveled to catch him for the third and killing shot but it was too late. Union was down under it, at the base of the wall. It vanished, outside hooves thudded dully and Union was up, snatching the Winchester off the ingot pile and scrambling onto the table. He jammed the rifle muzzle through the grille and peered out over it. Across the sand, headed for the nearby arroyo went the horseman, rowels driving deep.

HE WAS almost on top of it, in another instant he would be down in the sandy ravine. Union's eyes narrowed into the look of the old sharp-shooting days at Gettysburg. He snapshot and the sombrero went off the rider's head at about three hundred yards.

"Haste makin' waste again," he remarked grimly. "Call her a rangin' shot. Now ter hold right between the shoulders blades,

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squeeze and off his hoss an' inter Kingdom Come he goes."

The barrel of the Winchester rested on the lower sill of the aperture. Union's hand was as steady as a rock, the back of the fleeing would-be killer rose into the sight. "Good-bye, dry-gulcher," grunted Union. "Square in yore spine."

He began the deadly trigger squeeze and something struck him in the spine between his own shoulder blades. An enthusiastic voice rang in his ears.

"Get him, Union, he is yours, get him!"

Union's rifle jerked and exploded at the split second of trigger pressure. The rider went on and disappeared over the edge of the arroyo, unscathed. The pounding on Union's back went on, the voice of Barker hammered at him.

"Get him, Union, get him!"

"Get him?" Union lowered his rifle and turned around. "You damn sunshine dispenser, I had him cold, then you knocked my aim off, beatin' me on the back."

"I knocked your aim off, friend Jones?" Gladwell Barker, who had clambered to the table-top beside Union looked startled. "I could see him over your shoulder, I was trying to encourage you."

"You call beatin' a sharpshooter between the shoulder blades jest as he has drawed his bead helpin' with encouragement? Heck, he has got away."

"And we shall never know who he was. Just the back of a rider disappearing. A mysterious hand that came through a wall and fired."

"That hand wasn't so gorrymighty mysterious ter me. It had a bandage around it, leavin' the trigger finger free. And that bandage hides the blister which sprung out on the hand o' the three-gun artilleryman I hot-coaled."

"So he trailed you here and shot you out of revenge."

"That would do it, I figger."

"Union—" came a gasp from behind him. Cashier Beanpole Stebbins and the armed guard had plunged into the strongroom. Beanpole clutched a six-gun in a shaking fist.

"What has happened?"

"I was took a shot at. It ain't the first time. Ferget it, an' fer gaw's sake put that tremblin' fireiron back in yore drawer before it goes off an' kills some innocent depositor. Howdy, Speed, the shootin' bring you, too?"

"This did," Murphy, just entering and holding out the message. "I seen you go into the bank. Paradise sheriff has answered pronto pronto rush rush."

"It be remarkable how fast a sheriff will put a description on the wire when he be paid newspaper space rates fer it instead o' nuthin'. Here we have 'em. 'Gentleman George . . . tall, well-built, flamin' red hair and red mustachees. . . . Puma Morales, short, bowlegged Mexican, powder burn in right ear' . . . Heck, that be Rafael Vegas the rancher whose earrings I won. . . . 'Three-gun Dirk Candee . . . old, dry scar over temple . . . wedgy chin'—my hot-coal assassinator.

"Good Gorrymighty, we have already had two o' Gentleman George Gaunt's gang right here in Jezebel. But they have vamoosed, that Three-Gun Candee is over the border by now an' that Rafael Vegas Puma Morales was leavin' away back around one o'clock. Gentleman George, he ain't nowhere around unless he be that new bartender over ter the Mesa Saloon with the sorrel top an' the orange waxed handlebars an' stultified manner, which went to Harvard College. Cashier Dewberry Beanpole Stebbins, you can quit your quiverin' like an Arizony aspen. Yore gold be all cozy an' safe."

"Safe?" groaned Beanpole. "I just got the word Ben Bones has been invalided up to the Grand Hotel with somebody sitting nurse beside him and he won't be back to work for three days. Now the bank has got a fortune in gold in its strongroom and no door. I'll have to sit guard all night with two clerks and the regular guard, maybe more. We are desperately vulnerable and Jezebel is filled with a lot of bad characters."

"No town in the frontier has got more of 'em," stated Union with proper civic pride. "They keep life interestin' if short. Beanpole, once agin I shall come to yore rescue. From personal observation, datin' from the time when I was an unusually bright young tadpole, I have learned plenty about blacksmithin'. What be the difference between shoein' a hoss, a-drivin' red-hot nails inter his hooves an' lettin' 'em cool an' shoein'

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the iron bars onto a grille, a-slammin' the rivets into the bottom o' the bars? Blacksmith Jones will replace Blacksmith Ben Bones. I shall rivet them bars on the grille door with this here forge an' by nine o'clock tonight you can hang the door back on its hinges, lock it an' dismiss yoreself an' the tenderfoot clerks, leavin' just the regular guard."

"Union," gasped Beanpole, "you are a friend indeed!"

"I be such a friend, Beanpole, that I shall only charge the Bank o' Jezebel twenty-five bucks fer the job."

"Twenty-five bucks!" howled Beanpole. "Robber, skinflint, swindler!"

"Stop callin' yoreself names in the presence of an honest blacksmith. Take it or leave it. No door an' sit up all night on guard fer three days or door fer twenty-five bucks by a coupla hours after nightfall."

"Door," gurgled Beanpole.

"Good, we be the best o' friends again."

"Introduce me to your friend, Union," said Gladwell Barker. "I expect to do business with this bank."

"This be Gladwell Barker, the Old Missouri Sunshine Dispenser," said Union in a formal tone. "Head redeye drummer fer the company, which he has saved my life twice today first with his revivifyin' whiskey and then with a gun from Puma Morales o' Gentleman George's gang. He would be a most valuable customer."

"I expect to close an order with the Mesa early tonight," said Barker. "It will be for cash, due to our discount for same. Could I come in here after dark and buy a bank draft to send to the home office? Also, Union, if you figure to be through your valuable labors by then, I shall be glad to refresh you with more samples from my case."

"I could swing a blacksmith's sledge all day knowin' Paul Revere Rye or Pony Express Bourbon was to be my reward at the end of it," said Union fervently. "Cashier Stebbins will be pleased ter welcome you in the front office, no doubt, an' I shall be more nor pleased ter greet you here in this gold vault. You wanta lookit the gold? I put it under the sacks."

He stripped the sacks off the pile of ingots. They glowed with the old sheen.

"Seem ter grow an' fill the room, don't they?" said Union. "It be the magic o' gold workin' on the elemental nature o' man. It makes the eyes gleam an' the pulse pulsate."

Sunshine Dispenser Barker's eyes actually were gleaming with what seemed an answering fire as he stared at the hoard. Beanpole Stebbins was licking his lips.

"Cease ter drool with avarice, Beanpole," suggested Union and flung the sacks back. He stepped to the forge and stared into the mold beneath the small crucible, which was filled now with bubbling metal. He lifted it off the fire with the tongs and put it aside on the floor.

"When it cools off you can weigh it an' cash it fer me, Beanpole. Sunshine Dispenser Barker be not the only one of us doin' business with the bank today. Now ter cross the street an' collect Ben Bones' apron an' any tools I think might be handy. Put yore guard on this doorless dump, Beanpole, foller me, Sunshine Dispenser Gladwell Barker."

OUT into the blazing sunshine and into the shadows of the smithy proceeded Union and Barker. Union retrieved the apron that he had removed from the stricken Ben Bones and unbuttoned his flannel shirt.

"Union," said Barker, "I still have $500 for you. Did you actually change your mind about accepting it and postponing the *Courier's* publication until tomorrow back there in the vault?"

"I did," grunted Union. "You do not know what it be ter suffer with a New England conscience. It did not whisper, it rose a-bellerin' in my ear, remindin' me what a newspaperman be always expected ter get out his sheet on time. But then somethin' else happened, I was shot at. Which reminded me that life be most fleetin' in Jezebel an' that I just missed bein' assassinated an' one should do as many good deeds an' good business deals as possible while enjoyin' its slight span. It be a bribe, Sunshine Dispenser Barker, but it be an honest bribe."

He pulled the shirt over his head, his beard and bald cranium disappearing in its folds. His voice came, muffled.

"Slip the five hundred bucks in my hip pocket now while I can not see what you be doin' or know how it got there. There will be no *Courier* tonight."

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III

Beneath the spreadin' chestnut tree
The village smithy stands . . .

BANG . . . bang . . . bang! The redhot rivet was going into its hole, under the smashing blows of Union Jones' hand sledge. His voice was roaring in the baking oven of the sheet-iron vault.

The smith a mighty man be he
With broad an' sinewy hands . . .

Bang . . . bang . . . bang . . . bang . . . bang! Only the head of the rivet showed now.

An' the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

Bang . . . bang . . . bang . . . bang! The chamber reverberated, the glowing head of the rivet flattened out on the iron door, the last sledge blow clanged and Union stood away, his half-naked body in the leather apron bathed in perspiration

"The last hoss-shoe-nail driven home," he announced proudly. He went to the door and raised his voice in a yell. "Finished, Beanpole!" In half an hour you can hang the door on its hinges an' go home."

"Thank heaven!" ejaculated Beanpole, coming out of the cashier's cage and walking into the president's office. "I do not know which was worse, your insane sledge-hammering making a boiler shop out of this bank or your insane singing of the same thing over and over again."

"I was not singin', Beanpole, I was recitin' the famous blacksmith poem by Waldo Whittier Longfeller, the great Back Bay poet o' Boston, as an appropriate anthem ter my labors." He reached for the edge of the Indian blanket on rings above the door aperture and began to pull it across the opening. "Let her cool."

"What's that in there on top of the forge?" inquired Beanpole, peering over his shoulder. "It looks like a big metal box."

"Water tank ter toss the bad rivets in," said Union. "You cannot let a condemned no-good redhot rivet lie on the floor nor can you throw it inter cold water or it will explode. That be gently bilin' water I have slung at least a dozen failures inter." The blanket went the rest of the way across the open door.

"Any signs o' Sunshine Dispenser Gladwell Barker an' his bank draft an' sample case?"

"He has sent word by a boy that he will be in definitely for the bank draft at nine," said Beanpole. "It is now a quarter to."

"I figgered he would show up here." A gleam appeared in Union's eyes, as of expectation. "But fifteen minutes be a heck of a while fer an honest blacksmith ter wait fer a drink now that all be peace."

IT WAS indeed a tranquil scene that Union looked on through the door giving onto the main premises. A pair of clerks with green eyeshades and black alpaca sleeve protectors lazily dallied with the ledgers, beside the railing the six-gun guard half-drowsed in his chair, weapon dangling from his belt. The blinds were down over the plateglass front, the front door was closed and locked.

"Why wait fer whiskey approachin' when whiskey be right here?" said Union and went for the tabouret in the corner. He drew out the silver-mounted decanter and a glass, and reached into the box of cigars that reposed on the tabouret top.

"Union!" foamed Cashier Stebbins. "You stay away from President Samuel Simon's liquor and cigars."

"We be the best o' friends, Mister Samuel Simon an' I," said Union loftily. "Many's the time on which he has advanced me a personal character loan with which ter purchase whiskey at sundown." He sloshed a huge potion into the glass, jammed the gold-banded cigar into his beard and came back to the presidential desk where he dropped into the swivel chair and cocked his feet on the desk-top.

"Now, Cashier Stebbins, you white-collared capitalist, you scamper out inter yore cage an' get me my twenty-five bucks fer the blacksmithin' job. Honest, sweat-stained labor be talkin' ter mercenary management."

Beanpole glared at Union, the leather-aproned defiler of the presidential chair's dignity.

"Scamper, I said, Beanpole. My palm be itchin' which be a sign o' good health an' approachin' fortune."

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"You think you're smart, don't you?" A triumphant glitter showed in Beanpole's eyes.

Union blew a fragrant smoke ring ceilingward and engulfed half his potion.

"I do not jest think, I be smart, Beanpole. I know I be smart."

"Then take a look at this. You're paid, Union. Here's your twenty-five."

Union stared at the slip of paper Beanpole dropped on the desk-top. Its handwriting was terse and its import terrific.

I.O.U. $25
Union Jones

"I purchased it for five dollars from a distressed townsman during the supper hour, Union. You would not dishonor your own note of hand?"

"I been robbed! I been swindled! I been embezzled!" shrieked Union. "What a friend! Banking viper in my bosom!"

"Within the walls of a bank, Union, there is no such thing as friendship, only business, or there would be no banks," said Beanpole virtuously.

"Financial asp in the grass!"

"You held the bank up in its hour of distress for twenty-five dollars. You exhibited no friendship whatsoever at that time that I can recall. I have been able to reduce your exorbitant charge to five dollars by skilful manipulation, that is all." Beanpole smirked.

"Get out o' my sight!" moaned Union. "Out o' my sight before I do you a damage."

"It is yourself you will do the damage to if you carry on like this, Union," counseled Beanpole. "At your age and with the amount of whiskey you have thefted and poured into yourself, a stroke of apoplexy might well be on the horizon. All is fair in—"

"Love, war an' the bankin' business, you cobra in cashier's form!" yowled Union. He suddenly paused, his eyes going past Beanpole and traveling the front premises to the door.

"There be my friend, Gladwell Barker, the Old Missouri Sunshine Dispenser, knockin' at yore front door with his cash order fer you an' the whiskey fer me. Gaw, could I use a shot o' Paul Revere or Pony Express ter recover from the backstabbin' you have dealt! Let him in."

Beanpole Stebbins looked at the familiar figure in the bank's glass door and marched out to it. He unlocked, stepped aside as Gladwell Barker moved in and locked up again. The Sunshine Dispenser had his sample case in his left hand, his right reached up behind the skirts of his coat.

"Ah, Union!" he hailed. "I shall be with you in a moment. First the bank draft, my wallet seems to stick a trifle. The cashier's cage, please, Mr. Stebbins."

Beanpole led the way along the railing beside which sat the armed guard who raised his hand in recognition to Gladwell Barker. Gladwell Barker raised his own hand as he came alongside the guard, it flashed from his hip pocket and the barrel of the Navy Colt slammed down on top of the guard's head. He pitched from his chair to the floor like a poled ox. Barker sprang back and threw the key in the door lock, swinging it open.

"Come in, men!" he called. The Navy Colt swung to cover the pair of startled clerks. "Reach for those guns in your desk drawers and you get lead! Hands up and march out back into the strongroom! Stebbins, turn your back and up with yours!" Through the front door slithered the two men, closing it behind them. "Candee, lift this cashier's gun. Puma, drive the others ahead of you."

Beanpole's six was wrenched from his pocket, the scarred man jammed his iron into his back and Beanpole and his clerks were herded like sheep into the president's office. Not a sound had emerged from the bank to warn the street. Union's jaw lolled agape, he still sat in the presidential swivel chair with his feet up. Gladwell Barker laid his sample case on the desk.

"You red-nosed drunken clown," he said crisply, "this is a hold-up!"

"You be dispensin' me news?" gagged Union. "Welcome, Gentleman George Gaunt ter the Bank o' Jezebel, I suppose I oughta say. You have outsmarted me. These be Three-Gun Dirk Candee, o' course, who slipped back into town from the arroyo, an' Puma Morales, the late Rafael Vegas, who never left but stayed undercover. The bank be yores, Gentleman George, I can offer no resistance. The gold be in yonder. They

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ain't no door on the vault yet. Go in an' help yoreself."

"Union!" shrieked Beanpole. "Are you trying to aid the enemy?"

"I ain't gonna be no dead hero resistin' 'em, Beanpole. I do not see you puttin' up any magnificent fight ter protect yore depositors, an' their interests. You, too, have surrendered ter Gentleman George."

"Yes, I am Gentleman George Gaunt," said the Sunshine Dispenser. "Only no white buckskin riding suit, no red hair and mustaches. Blackened hair, clean-shaven, a traveling whiskey salesman's clothes and sample case. I shed Gentleman George when I crossed the Colorado border ahead of the posse, we have been lying low since. In Paradise I learned of the ingots and came on to scout the chance of lifting them in Jezebel, two days ago, leaving Candee and Puma behind to knock off the express payroll as our funds were low. There was gunfire, they were chased and split up. Puma galloped straight through to Jezebel and was here by eleven o'clock last night. Candee's horse lamed and he hid out in the malpais all night with the payroll. In the meantime, Jones, you clown, I had latched onto you."

"I can guess why," said Union. "I was a newspaperman an' you figgered you could pump me fer all sorts o' valuable information."

"Exactly. Puma told me he and Candee had been recognized as part of Gentleman George's gang. I knew the descriptions would be published in the Jezebel paper, I had either to kill off those descriptions or kill off the printer of the paper to stop them coming out. Candee's scar, Puma's ear and bow legs were telltales. So I had Puma feign a threat to you over his earrings, and held him off with my gun to put you under obligations to me, which enabled me to stick by you and ask you for any favor or news of the search.

"After Candee left the smithy I met him in Mexican Alley and fixed it for him to shoot you at the cue of 'Five hundred dollars, Jones'. I didn't dare count on the $500 bribe, so you had to go with Candee's description coming over the wire to you. He was more than eager due to that hot-coal business. Of course, I jostled your aim at him.

"Ben Bones' sardines were easy. Tasteless knockout drops in one of those bottles in my case. Then the door to the strongroom stayed off. When you volunteered as blacksmith I arranged an entry for a bank draft before you could finish the job."

"I been befoozled, I been hornswoggled!" gurgled Union. "I have been up agin a mastermind without knowin' it."

"Banks are often tough nuts to crack," said Gentleman George. "But this one is cracked. Into the vault, every one of you! After we have sacked the ingots you are going to put the door back on its hinges and I am locking you up in it."

"We shall perish!" yelled Union. "Nobody will come into the bank till Monday. The forge fire be on an' they be no water ter put it out. We shall die o' heat an' thirst an' general confinement. Do not do this ter us, Sunshine Dispenser Gladwell Barker Gentleman George Gaunt!"

"What happens to you is none of my business," said Gentleman George. The glacial stare was back in his eyes, he was a ruthless, super-efficient frontier bank-smasher.

"We are going to loot and gallop without looking at anything we may leave behind us. Into the vault!"

"Yes, sir," said Union humbly. "I know when I be licked."

THE group moved past the Indian blanket and into the sheet iron-lined chamber where the heat stifled.

"There you be, Gentleman George," Union waved at the table. "Gold pigs with the sacks over 'em. Loot an' gallop."

"Load up, Candee, I'll cover these men," said Gentleman George, six-gun muzzle swinging from person to person. The scarred man went to the table and snatched the bags away.

"Bricks!"

There they lay in a neatly stacked pile, red-brown and drab, instead of richly gleaming yellow.

"Dobe bricks instead of gold!" grated Candee.

"Yessir," said Union. "Them are the bricks Ben Bones knocked outer the outside wall fer ventilatin' purposes an' piled in the corner. They be the size an' shape o' the jolly yaller gold, boys, but they be valuable

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only fer buildin' purposes or fer throwin' at yowlin' cats."

"The gold, you fool!" Gaunt brought up his Navy Colt and leveled it at Union's head. His lips worked back over his teeth, he was feral with frustration. "The gold, where is it? It hasn't left this bank."

"It ain't left this room," said Union. "I shall show it ter you." He picked a pair of tongs off the floor, stepped to the forge and lifted the lid of the big steel box that squatted on the fire. "There be yore gold, Gentleman George, simmerin' away."

The interior of the steel box was a mass of gently bubbling yellow metal, the ingots were melting and fusing into each other visibly.

"She has bin a-bilin' fer a long while now," said Union. "In that home-improvised crucible which the bank records was stored in. It don't take long fer gold ter melt together. It all be the property o' the Paradise mine, what the Paradise mine has got now be one big ingot instead of a lot o' smaller ones. I do not suggest that you try to traipse off with that bilin' or even stir it with yore finger."

"Damn you!" snarled Gentleman George. "Here you get it," and his finger curled on the trigger.

"Let her rip, Pete!" shrieked Union and dodged to the side.

"Get their guns!"

Once more gunfire erupted in the iron-lined room, the slam of four rifles. Lead clanged on the metal floor. Gaunt's gun was knocked from his hand before he could press trigger, Puma Morales and Candee uttered yells of shock and pain, and stood looking at the bullet-broken hands from which their weapons had fallen. Through four barred ventilating apertures only feet overhead projected the muzzles of the Winchesters.

"Okay, Pete!" called Union. He bent down and picked up two of the guns. "You can climb on down an' get 'em."

FOOTSTEPS sounded overhead, there were the thuds of men jumping off the low one-story building into soft sand. "Beanpole, pick the key outer Gentleman George's pockit, an' open up the door ter Deputy Sheriff Pete an' posse." His guns waved toward Gentleman George and his glaring wounded men. "I have got everythin' under control."

"Union, you—you—" gagged Beanpole, and left. Through the front door came Pete, the burly deputy and half-a-dozen capable looking, armed townsmen.

"Yuh are smart, you old coot, Union," grinned Pete. "Yore plan it has worked to perfectionism."

"It be my prodigious newspaperman's super-intelligence," said Union modestly. "It be the case o' the spider which tried ter get the fly ter walk into its parlor walkin' into the fly's parlor an' gettin' stuck on the fly's flypaper."

Gentleman George Gaunt stared at Union. He was cool, hard and courageous in disaster.

"Sooner or later I suppose it had to happen," he said. "Union, when did you guess I was Gentleman George Gaunt?"

"It sort o' built itself up. They was bits an' pieces which by themselves was quite innocent, but you string 'em together on a chain an' they give a totally different picture. You drew that gun on yore accomplice Puma Morales back in my room in a lightnin' flash, it was like it was part o' yore hand, which meant you had drawed it many, many times before an' was no amateur. One o' them notches on it was new, only weeks old, an' you cannot buy a gun or a watch or any object out of a pawnshop until it has been there a year, unredeemed. I ought ter know.

"Ben Bones he was struck by sardines, when you was left alone next the sardines, you offered me a whale of a sum jest ter postpone the *Courier,* with the Gentleman George descriptions which I was regettin' after you destroyed 'em, fer one night. You made thet bank draft allbi ter get into the bank unsuspected. Oh, you was logical all the way through fer what you done an' that was the hell of it. I can become considerable logical myself, when I have ter although I prefer ter act like human nature in the raw.

"Killin' me, o' course, like you figgered, would be safer than bribin' me ter hold up the *Courier* because I would natcherally give the sheriff's office the replaced descriptions meanwhile. How did Candee know I could be assassinated in this here vault unless you told him? So it all come out in the

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wash that you must be Gentleman George, shaved an' hair-blacked, who was goin' ter hit the bank tonight before I finished the door. I tottered up ter the sheriff's office an' told Deputy Pete ter get onto the roof with a posse after dark an' lay fer you, I would lure you in."

"You did."

"I wanted ter have the bank assaulted, an' capture Gentleman George Gaunt an' his crew red-handed. It give me the excitin' news which the *Courier* be in desperate need of. It ain't the first time an experienced newspaperman has stirred up somethin' in order ter dip his pen interestingly an' sensationally in ink. I guess that be all."

"All it is," said Deputy Pete. "Line up there, prisoners, yore off for the calaboose, stoppin' at Doc Mac's for them hands on the way."

"Get yore posse ter hang the new grille door on its hinges first, will you, Pete?" said Union.

"It has cooled off. The forge fire be dyin', it will take care of itself an' so will thet big bilin' o' gold. Beanpole, yore strongroom now be all tidied up an' cozier than ever, my job be done an' I know exactly where I be goin' an' what I be goin' fer."

HE STALKED out of the vault, followed by Beanpole and plumped himself down in the presidential chair, still in his sooty apron.

"The mental anguish you have caused me!" yowled Beanpole, his features working. "Letting the bank be hit by bandits, telling me nothing of your diabolical plan. I never would have allowed it!"

"Thet was jest the trouble, you quiverin' Arizona aspen," said Union. "You would of put twenty guards out front an' Gentleman George would be shied off. He would never have been took an' I never would have had no newspaper story. This one be a most profitable circulation booster."

"You—you—" Beanpole bubbled wordlessly.

"Beanpole, you weigh that small bilin' o' mine from the jewelry? How much did it come ter?"

"One hundred and fifty dollars."

"Then get yoreself some more mental anguish by givin' me that cash right now from the till. Gimme, I said!"

Beanpole Stebbins tottered into the front, looking like a broken man. Deputy Pete and his posse were traversing the presidential office on their way to the street.

"Good-bye, Union," said Gentleman George.

"Good-bye, Sunshine Dispenser Gladwell Barker Gentleman George Gaunt," responded Union. "Yore $500 bribe I be goin' ter return ter the Paradise express you plundered." He drew toward him the glass that stood on the desk and flung up the lid of the black leather whiskey sample case. "This you will not have no need of where you be goin'."

"It is yours, Union, take it as a gift from me to the only man who ever outwitted me."

"You are a gentleman, Gentleman George Gaunt, despite yore confirmed habit o' pillagin' banks an' payrolls." Union studied the array of sample bottles. "An' now fer a further gentlemanly act, tell me which be the little bottle with the knockout drops in it."

"The one with the X cut in its cork."

"Thanks, Gentleman George. I shall avoid that one."

Union lifted out two phials, sniffed expertly and drained their contents into the glass.

"Jest a final partin' favor, Gentleman George. What would happen should I mix Paul Revere's Ride with the Pony Express?"

"The results would be unprecedented," said Gentleman George and went out the door with a gun in his back, ahead of the shepherding posse.

"Thanks, Gentleman George," Union called after him. "I be doin' it."

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"That drilling platform mentioned in my yarn is really something. It is situated in the open Gulf, eight miles south of Grande Isle, once the haunt of pirates. In fact, many descendants of Nez Coupe, one of Jean Lafitte's lieutenants, live there and are respected citizens. The platform was built by the Humble Oil Company at a cost of one million eight hundred thousand dollars. The first well was drilled to a depth of 9424 feet, through a salt dome, which was reached at 9374 feet. The same company operates another deep-sea location at Caminada Pass, also off Grand Isle.

"That 'dead' ammunition in the burp gun has a precedent in local history. During the era of the 'noble experiment,' a friend whom I shall call Smith went on a selling trip through the wilds of Hancock County, our westernmost coast country. On the road he met a deputy sheriff and gave the officer a lift in his car. They stopped at an isolated cabin deep in the piney woods, and were treated to a drink of excellent 'shinny'

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by the inhabitant. The deputy then jokingly remarked that Smith was a Federal prohibition snoop. Whereupon the shinny manufacturer hauled an ancient hog-leg from a shoulder holster and, before the deputy could stop him, fired three shots at Smith. To everyone's surprise, Smith wasn't even knocked down, although he suffered painful bruises in the abdominal region. You see, the ammunition in the gun was so old it was coated with verdigris. One dreads to think of the result had the loads been fresh. Nevertheless, Smith had to be hospitalized for several days. The last time I heard of him he was operating a motel somewhere in North Mississippi. Anyway, I believe that this 'old ammunition' incident should be of interest to Peter Kuhlhoff."

NEIL MARTIN

(We have just discussed this ammo curiosity with Pete Kuhlhoff and, as Mr. Martin predicted, he *was* interested. "Those things can happen," agrees Pete. But when he asked us the calibre and type of gun, whether the powder was old-fashioned black or smokeless, we had to play dumb. "A lot of things could cause that," opined the sage of Shooter's Corner. "The primers might have been defective"—a reflective pause—"or maybe the firing pin was short." Another reflective pause. "Say," said Pete, "I'd like to *see* that ancient hog-leg, the shoulder holster, *and* the victim." So, Mississippi, for all we know Peter Kuhlhoff on us."—PETER DAWSON.

Truer Than True

AS OUR new range serial gallops into its second installment in this number of SHORT STORIES, writer Peter Dawson can be heard remarking that although "The Stirrup Boss" is not based on any exact locale or any characters taken from real life, it seems *truer* to life in some ways than many factually-based yarns.

"Yes, I think that's so," says Dawson. "Jim Kirby, for instance, must have had many approximate counterparts in the old days. It has been my intention to demonstrate the truth that your *average* 'range hog' was, in fact, as human and fallible and basically generous as the average cowpoke. There are numerous instances in range his-

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tory of the Kirbys being outwitted and brought under steady rein by the stubbornness and courage of the Fred Vances, thereafter to become humbler men with more kindly leanings. One other point: the betrayal of man by his best friend is as old as recorded history and, disagreeable as the realization may be, the Tom Demmlers of this world are legion.

"Mention of Tom Demmler brings to mind the difficulty any prolific writer faces in constantly selecting names for new characters. My practice is usually to get them from the files of old Territorial newspapers of seventy or eighty years back. Yet, oddly perhaps, a writer's direct association with a certain handle sometimes gives added life and warmth to any character wearing it. In 'Stirrup Boss' several of the people stood to profit from traveling under given or surnames out of my acquaintance, though it is my rule never to use both the first and last name of any real person knowingly.

"Only when the last installment was being drafted did it suddenly dawn on me that I had once known a Tom Demmler. It jolted me further to realize what a pure-bred sidewinder my fictional person had become whereas the real Tom Demmler is the salt of the earth. Yet the name was so firmly in mind and story that it seemed best not to change it; so the story's Demmler remains the exact opposite of the true one.

"There is a Vance of my acquaintance who has quite as much hero potential as Fred Vance. Lola is my favorite aunt and may not appreciate what I have made of Lola Demmler; yet in the end my Lola proves out as a woman who needn't hang her head. The one Marguerite of my acquaintance should need no appeasing except from the standpoint of her nickname, which may startle her somewhat.

"And what about the story's title? Fred Vance himself might be riled at being called the Stirrup Boss, so perhaps we'd better let the subject rest before the hero walks out on us."—PETER DAWSON.

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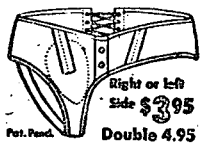

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"For instance, *Ben Higgins,* the detective I wrote about, in 'The Ragged Edge,' I know quite well. I met him several years ago. He is really a detective, although Ben Higgins isn't his name. He is tall, gaunt, soft-spoken, a quiet man most of time, but if you get him stirred up on the subject of juvenile delinquency and its causes, you might as well plan on spending the rest of the evening listening to him. And it is usually well worth it.

"I also know the girl in the story, *Maria Scarcelli.* She worked for me during the war when I was with one of the war agencies. She had a brother to whom she was intensely loyal, who was always in trouble, who was weak but not bad. Maria (of course that isn't her name), stood by him no matter what he did so far as the world was concerned, working always to straighten him up. She never succeeded.

"It is sometimes easy to write a story. Usually it's hard. The other day I received a letter from my son who is with the airlift in Germany. In it, he spoke of the days ahead when his service would be over and he could settle down to writing stories. My daughter, in junior high, insists that she will be a writer. So now, when a story comes hard, I close my eyes and lean back and relax and dream of the time when I can turn my two typewriters over to my two children, and retire.

"I hope that time comes soon. I hope it comes before all the fish are caught and before all the golf courses are cut up for new sub-divisions. Al and I (Al being the wife), would like nothing better than to spend the rest of our days fishing and playing golf.

"And it might work out that way, but of course it won't, for as sure as death and taxes, I'd just get started to fishing or playing golf when I would think of a story and of people to fit it, and I would have to quit fishing or playing golf and buy a new typewriter and start to work again.

"That's the trouble with writing. Now and then you love it. Now and then you would rather tell a story than do anything else under the sun."—PHILIP KETCHUM.

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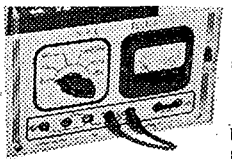

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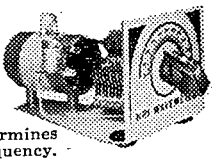

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You get the benefit of big, powerful ads in magazines like The Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping, Life, etc. People *know* Mason—are eager to get the special Personal Fitting Service we advertise for your benefit. And remember, we pay for all this advertising—it doesn't cost you a cent.

NOW Is the Time

The people right around you are eager to have you demonstrate and sell them Mason's exclusive Zipper Shoes—no laces—special comfort features. Air Cushion shoes—superb FOOT PRESERVERS with extra support for weak feet. They know about the way you can fit them—save them money—end the foot trouble caused by wrong-size shoes.

EXTRA Advantages

If you act promptly, you'll get our great Free Sample Outfit that puts a "shoe store business" right in your pocket—you'll get the special sales training that 5,000 successful salesmen prepared for you—measuring devices—demonstrators—*EVERYTHING you need to start making money the very first hour.*

Remember, Mason Shoes are backed by the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval—neither you nor your customers can lose a dime—and you have everything to gain.

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES

ZIPS on—off

Top-quality, glove-soft, with the Zipper everybody is eager for. It's included in your FREE Sample Outfit.

Leather Jackets

Tremendous demand for these fine leather jackets, at far-below-store prices. Included in your FREE Sample Outfit.

Velvet-Eez Air Cushions

Exclusive Air Cushion insole cradles foot on 10,000 tiny air bubbles. Ten-second demonstration practically Guarantees sales.

Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

RUSH THE COUPON NOW!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-357, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Put me in a "shoe store business"! Rush me great FREE Sample Outfit featuring Zipper shoes, Air Cushion shoes, Leather jackets—other fast-selling specialties. Show me how your National advertising makes more customers and profits for me. Send everything free and prepaid. (My own shoe size is _____).

Name_____

Address_____

Town_____ State_____

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

Dept. M-357, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

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